

RABBIT BOUND

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree
of

Master of Arts in American Studies

in the
University of Canterbury
by

J. A. Trost

University of Canterbury

1986

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	ABSTRACT	1
	INTRODUCTION	2
I	Rules of the Game	18
II	The Self	35
III	Traps and Escapes	61
IV	Religion	84
V	Women	96
	CONCLUSION	113
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	118

ABSTRACT

This work looks at John Updike's trilogy of Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux and Rabbit is Rich and makes the contention that there is an overall thematic line in these works. The three novels are approached in toto, theme wise, although there is also to some degree, a time progression as the chapters develop. The character of Harry Angstrom, known as Rabbit, is the prime consideration of this study and the presentation is organised in terms of a thematic approach rather than as a discussion of style or technique.

The three novels, in being treated as an entity, have had little material written on them; thus this thesis is breaking new ground. Furthermore, in previous studies of the first two novels, critics have failed to isolate and then to elucidate upon, a theme that all other themes are subversive to and are therefore, conditioned by.

The trilogy covers a twenty year period and each novel exhibits similar formats: Rabbit is shown as a disillusioned individual who looks to escape from an unhappy situation; he "experiences"; and then like the prodigal son, returns. In each of the novels however, the breakdown of the institution is different, as to, is the goal searched for different. Having substantiated the claim that there is an overall theme for the three works, we then consider its implications for the protagonist and whether our understanding and knowledge of the character of Rabbit is more complete because of it.

INTRODUCTION

He feels love for each phenomenon and not for the first time in his life seeks to bring himself into harmony with the intertwining simplicities that uphold him, that were woven into him at birth. There must be a good way to live.¹

To consider John Updike's trilogy of Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux and Rabbit is Rich; is to study quite specifically the character of Rabbit himself. For it is through Rabbit that the novels unfold, and it is Rabbit's perception of his environment that once again places before us the familiar middle-class suburbia of Updike's writing. The other characters of these novels are seen fundamentally, as they relate to Rabbit and his needs: "That was the thing about him, he just lived in his skin and didn't give a thought to the consequences of anything".² And as Rabbit sees himself: "If you have the guts to be yourself ... other people'll pay your price".³

What many critics of Updike's Rabbit have failed to achieve; whether it be in studying the individual novels or over the trilogy as a whole, is the identification of

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 129.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 120-121.

³Ibid. p. 121.

an over-riding theme that will open up the character of Rabbit, and to which all the usual themes that are recognisable in Updike's work, such as religion, sex and the environment, are subversive to.

The quintessence of all three novels - the moving force embodied within Rabbit's character; is his deep rooted need for boundaries. This need for boundaries and the security that he believes is held within their ambit, is what conditions if not all, then certainly much, of Rabbit's actions and also the role played by the other underlying themes of these three novels. The causality of Rabbit's need for boundaries is not initially considered. So, whether these boundaries have been enforced upon Rabbit as Tanner would posit - that Rabbit lives within the "compromised environment" of American suburbia¹ - or are brought about through Rabbit's upbringing, an inherent need for security, or a need for an identity and a belief system that gives him a "place" within Creation; are questions that will be answered as we become better acquainted with the character of Rabbit.

While it is relatively easy to recognise and define the boundaries Rabbit needs to work within - it is harder to be specific as to the motivating forces behind this need. Looking at his need for boundaries we can see them progress out from the symbolic game syndrome through the

¹Tanner, City of Words, p. 273.

self and continuing outward through family, society, God and America. As we follow Rabbit through the twenty years these works cover, we will be able to discover whether his need for boundaries is still as relevant as it was when he was twenty six. And if boundaries are still in evidence, are they the same ones they have always been?

What is important to note, is the fact that we recognise that these boundaries do exist for Rabbit and that in so recognising, we will now achieve a far more penetrating study into, and a greater understanding of, Rabbit's character than has so far been the case. The crux of this thesis is boundaries - how Rabbit has created them as a protection for those institutions that he needs to hold onto and how these boundaries in turn, become barriers for him, barriers that prevent him from participating in a life that he so much wants to be a part of.

If we want to understand Rabbit, it is necessary to know the motives for his actions, and the driving force is as often as not, the quest to retain and to hold onto, existing boundaries. These boundaries, like ripples on a pool are concentric - they move outward from Rabbit in the form of boundaries of the self - the need to protect himself, which at the same time places barriers between himself and his need to belong within other boundaries of such institutions as man-woman relationships, family, God, society and work - all with varying degrees of importance as they move outward from his inner needs.

Thus we will see Rabbit as equally secure as he is to be repressed by his need for boundaries. He wants the security and the solidity of family, of acceptance of being "someone" within society and the knowledge of an omnipotent God. There are roles to be played out and Rabbit has that innate feeling of being a specific part of an inviolable world. But when the boundaries that he has mentally created around such institutions begin to disintegrate - it acts as a major force in articulating a thematic line which is, that of flight. It is when his conceptualized boundaries begin to break down or to disintegrate, that Rabbit feels compelled to reassess; which often takes the form of what some critics term "mindless flight" but which is in reality, a purposeful quest for redirection.

The protagonist of these novels is Harry Angstrom, known as Rabbit from his days as a high -school basketball star. When we first meet up with him he is twenty six years old, has a job demonstrating a kitchen peeler and is married to a high-school girlfriend. He has a two year old child and his wife Janice is expecting again. Updike, in Rabbit, Run, clearly delineates the environment that Rabbit is placed within - the pressures and traps of contemporary life with the claustrophobic nature of our institutions: "... an economy which traps a man into hucksterism, tenement housing which traps a man and his family into close, airless, nerve-shattering "togetherness" and unimaginative, dirty cities which offer no release

for the spirit".¹ Rabbit flees from his family and spends a night on the road heading south before heading back to Brewer, but not back home. Instead he goes to his old coach for sanctuary and later moves in with a prostitute, Ruth, for a time. When his wife enters labour however, he rejoins her and for a time he makes a go of it but the walls close in again and he leaves the flat after his wife rejects his body. He returns once again after the death of his baby daughter but at the close of the book we see him once again in flight.

What one is first confronted with in Rabbit, Run is the search for a hero - the need to look for redeeming features in Rabbit. It is necessary to believe in him - to feel he has direction, motivation or at least that degree of emotional depth that will help inveigle him into the consciousness of the reader; so that, whatever his actions, they are understood within the context of those constraints or limits that his character has revealed. But from the outset, what Updike has created is a very plausible but not an altogether likeable Harry Angstrom. We are not given a very favourable image of him, his portrayal is established in "the murk and mire of everyday situations".²

¹ Thorburn & Eiland, John Updike. A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 18.

² Burr, An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, p. 8.

Updike's Rabbit is not on first acquaintance, a very attractive individual. Though he is sensitive, not unkind or voracious, nor motivated by ambition; he is selfish - his needs are paramount and he has a vocabulary of platitudes that upon utterance help make him shrink in the eyes of the reader and thus lets himself down and loses our sympathy.

Markle writes that "the society in which Rabbit lives has a comprehensive and complex set of social norms involving mutual responsibility: Rabbit is expected to live with and support his family; he is expected to keep a job he dislikes because he is financially responsible for his family; he is expected to consider other people's feelings".¹ As the minister Eccles says: "We are all responsible beings, responsible for ourselves and for each other".² What Burchard contends is that "Harry Angstrom evades responsibility to search for Truth", that he is a "nearly hopeless egotist",³ but that he does evince a spark of purpose in life, for Rabbit believes that waiting for him somewhere is something good to give his life direction.⁴ Rabbit indeed, is the dreamer of the American dream - "American dream. When he first heard the phrase as a kid he pictured God lying sleeping, the quilt-coloured map of

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 37.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 128.

³Burchard, John Updike. Yea Sayings, p. 54.

⁴Ibid. p. 83.

the U.S. coming out of his head like a cloud".¹

That Rabbit, in Rabbit, Run is perhaps the only character to believe in a "something" above the natural level and thus struggles upward towards it or seeks to recognise it, is all too apparent. But critics who state that Rabbit is "trying to run clear of emeshing social complexities", that Rabbit as a "star player refuses to be forced into the role of team player",² are not entirely justified in their argument. For what Rabbit flees from is the disintegration of those social values that should rightly accompany responsibility and he is unable to make the transition into a society that has different rules from those he is used to playing by. And in running, what Rabbit searches for is not just that "thing behind everything"; it is also a search for a lost environment, perhaps that of youth, maybe the concept of the American dream, or perhaps it is just the reinstatement of structures and a value system that Rabbit once had faith in, but which he now feels is quickly dissipating to the detriment of his fellow beings. He craves "something" but it is not simply a religious experience for Rabbit already has a strong belief in the design and nature of life.

The fact that Rabbit is a "tidy" individual, a point made constantly by Updike, indicates that any search Rabbit makes has to be confined to certain limits and for

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 106.

²Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 3.

Rabbit that ultimate limit is the "ceiling" of God's world. When Rabbit takes flight he does not escape into an infinite space but rather he searches for the perimeter of a larger concept of life than the one he has known - and in seeking, he carries the need for security into that new situation. Therefore, as Rabbit moves through the novels we see his affiliation moving outward from self to family to society and to America generally, before coming back full circle to the boundary of man-woman relationships now placed in a stronger position because of his constant need for companionship and his innate sense of survival.

Rabbit needs the security of boundaries. It is what holds him together. Contrary to the view of many critics; his flight from his responsibilities, his seeming disregard for those institutions that he had considered inviolable and had thus placed a protective boundary around; is not an unconsidered nor wilful act. Rather, his escapes occur only when the boundaries he has been conditioned to accept, begin to disintegrate and even then, as will be shown, he first assures himself of the liberation he has been presented with (often through the actions of others), before "re-routing" his life.

Burr writes of Rabbit that he is running scared, running in circles when faced with danger, responsibility or fear. He claims that Updike "offers an account of a pilgrimage, in which a man tries to discover the reason for his being" and that when caught "in a series of traps,

he tries to wheedle out of them by avoiding confrontation with authority, but all of his life seems to be a series of accidents. Most of the times he emerges from his predicaments seemingly unscathed, but those who are affected by him obviously do not fare as well".¹

We would counter this however by the assertion that for Rabbit, there is no real indecision. When he departs, escapes, flees - whatever one wishes to call it, he displays purpose - Florida, a return to Janice, a return to Ruth, heading for the straight road. When he comes to the realization that there is a straight road visible to him, he moves in that direction. When the road becomes confused - highways criss-crossing, he looks for another straight road. And that is the purpose of his movement - the idea that a straight road is also the "right" road, and therefore the correct action to take. He does not consciously think, "is this the right thing for me, Rabbit?" - it just feels right.

When we meet up with Rabbit again in Rabbit Redux nearly a decade later, he is immersed in the middle-class life from which he flees on the last pages of Rabbit, Run. But this second novel on Rabbit is not a retraction but rather a clarification of his character. For while Updike has placed the thirty six year old Rabbit in a precise social context linked to the recent 1960's years

¹Burr, Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, pp. 21-25.

of relative affluence, deepening national malaise and mass produced inauthenticity; Rabbit is sticking to his responsibilities now and living by the old American rules which it cost him so much to learn: family loyalty, hard work, sexual compromise. But in the 1960's such rules no longer seem to apply. "Everybody's the way I used to be", he says.¹ These are changed times and the novel is punctuated with reminders of a national era vanished, the most remarkable of these being a virtuoso description of a sparsely-attended baseball game, the magic of an American ritual turned into an empty charade.² As Rabbit comments to his father-in-law while they are at the game: "America, it's still the only place ... But something has gone wrong".³

Rabbit's wife has also changed. She is restless, no longer content just to stay at home. Janice, not Rabbit, is the one who now has an affair and leaves home. Lonely, adrift, Rabbit takes an 18 year old run-a-way girl into his house; he becomes her lover and father. The family expands when she brings home another stray - a black Vietnam veteran on the run, who styles himself an agent of apocalypse. After his house is burnt out Rabbit

¹ Thorburn & Eiland (ed.), John Updike. A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 36.

² Ibid. p. 45.

³ Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 76.

returns to his parents' home. In the end his wife decides to finish with her lover and comes back to her family.

Initially in this novel, Rabbit does not see himself as a causal agent of any importance. People will do as they will - he feels he cannot influence them to any significant degree. That Rabbit feels he cannot act in any meaningful way means consequently, that he accepts no responsibility for anything that happens. Thus he will not try to get Janice back, although she complains that he should. He will not stop Skeeter's abuse of Jill, although Nelson urges him to do so. And when Jill dies, he refutes Nelson's condemnation. But by the end of the novel, he has tentatively begun the painful move back to a sense of power and responsibility, back to a sense of significant human activity.

In Rabbit Redux, the colour white, a major thematic element, is used throughout to indicate those things which are especially associated with sterile whites. Jill, the hyperbole of the lost and disoriented white society, is always pictured in white - a white sheet, a white dress, a white car. Rabbit is repeatedly described as pale or white.¹ In this work we see the boundary image move away somewhat from the self and the family and concentrate itself more upon America, and into this society we are

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 9.

introduced to another boundary in Rabbit's life: the boundary of the white world, which is in part broken down by the presence of Skeeter. Along with the widening of his world or the breakdown of the power-prestige-missionary environment that America has been riding under, what Rabbit's voyage through Rabbit Redux constitutes, is a growing awareness of the fallibility of America, the lack of progression in his fellow man and the debilitating aspects of being merely human, merely alive. Rabbit, in witnessing a wider world that does not present an enlivening view, nevertheless, is no less satisfied with his immediate environment. He admits that America only "halfway works" but that halfway is "better than no way at all".

There is now maturity in Rabbit in that he is now able to face confrontation, but still not willingly. Where ten years previous he would have avoided confrontation - for he is not a fighter, now he is prepared to face a situation, for he has come to terms with the fact that there is nowhere to escape to and no real place to hide. So we see him trying to bring out into the open the uneasy feeling he is getting concerning Janice's behaviour at the start of the novel: "he likes the sensation, of frightening her, of offering to confront outright this faceless unknown he feels now in their lives".¹

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 37.

Rabbit is Rich presents us with a man who has not only come to terms with his limitations but is aware also that any potentiality he may have had is fast disappearing for he now feels that he "has risen as high as he can, the possibility of such women (the Du Pont type) is falling from him, falling with so many other possibilities as he descends".¹ But we also have here a man who knows that he has arrived, in a societal sense at least; for no longer does Rabbit feel as shut out of life as he did twenty years before. We only have to note Rabbit's view of the Mt. Judge houses in Rabbit, Run as he passes one block of big homes - "small fortresses of cement" and another block of frame houses with each double house containing "two wan windows, wide-spaced like the eyes of an animal ...",² to share with him feelings of being on the outside, of not being welcome; and then compare this with his view of the town of Mt. Judge as he drives in along Route 22 in Rabbit is Rich, facing a spectacle of "row houses ascending the slope of the mountain like stairs, their windows golden with setting sun like holes in a Hallowe'en pumpkin".³ One of the indicative features of these novels is that when Rabbit "scores" in life it is

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 394.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 7.

³Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 168.

associated with light or golden aspects. Conversely, when hope dies in Rabbit's world, the light goes out - "Skeeter dead, a certain light was withdrawn from the world, a daring, a promise that all would be overturned".¹ The knowledge that he has arrived gives Rabbit confidence and any separation that now occurs appears to be one of personal triumph, that he is ahead in the world. He feels "above them all, a golden man waiting to take his wife upstairs and show her their treasure".²

Rabbit has inherited, through his wife, a half share in her father's car sales business. He is in charge and he likes it. He now has money in the bank and a position in society - he belongs to Rotary, Chamber and a country club. He and his family moved in with Janice's parents after their own house had been burnt out ten years before, and they are still living under Mrs Springer's roof. Rabbit has a comfortable existence, if not a very exciting one. His life revolves around his workplace and the country club, he likes "having a wife who can be at the club so much".³

Rabbit has arrived at this period in his life with a value system that owes much of its basis to the articles

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 33.

²Ibid. p. 199.

³Ibid. p. 39.

he reads in Consumer Reports; but as is highlighted by the July issue with its depiction on the cover of a girl "made up in red, white and blue like a clown",¹ many of these values are rather laughable.

What breaks in and disturbs Rabbit's complacent existence is firstly the arrival at the lot of a girl who he instinctively recognizes as his and Ruth's daughter:

The calm eyes of the girl who showed up at the lot today haunt the growing shadows, a mystery arrived at this time of his own numb life .²
each day he is a little less afraid to die.

Another factor to affect Rabbit is the return home of his son Nelson who Rabbit sees solely as a threat to his balanced and comfortable life. For Rabbit has come to terms with living - he sees it now as mere survival. For though he has been relatively happy he also realizes that he has compromised. But then life does not always follow your instincts or your needs. He remembers from when he used to sit all day at the linotype, how "his own life closed in to a size his soul had not yet shrunk to fit".³

So what we see happening with Nelson's arrival, followed by his expectant girlfriend, is Rabbit attempting to extricate himself from a situation that is fast becoming crowded. He looks for escape - from the situation and

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 78.

²Ibid. p. 47.

³Ibid. p. 263.

from the ensuing responsibilities. Rabbit becomes motivated - motivated sufficiently to argue against Nelson's employment at the lot, to seek out Ruth and face her with the knowledge of their daughter, to enter the bullion market, to take a trip with his friends to the Caribbean and to leave the burrow safety of the Springer house and set up with Janice, a home of their own.

CHAPTER I

Rules of the Game

It's a, it's a kind of head fake. To keep the other guy off balance. The world the way it is, you got to do something like that once in a while, to keep your options, to keep a little space around you ... Otherwise, he gets so he can read your every move and you're dead.

We first meet Rabbit not that many years out of high school. "What he enjoyed during those years were aspects of an easy life, coupled with recognition and admiration".² His life was totally involved in being a basketball hero - "he's a natural ... Rabbit knows the way".³ Now he is pinned in the world of marriage, work and responsibility and though he is still recalled by some as a past hero, the reason why he was so, has quickly faded. Whilst the memories of actual score points and basketball situations are still vividly recalled by Rabbit himself, he is not remembered as much as he had imagined.

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 306.

²Burr, Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, p. 22.

³Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 5.

Even Rabbit's former coach, Tothero, who "was terrific. He was the greatest coach in the country. I would've been nothing without him",¹ has trouble in recalling Rabbit's game play: "Then what happened, Harry? Did you cream him? I've forgotten this whole incident".² This, despite Tothero's claim to Rabbit that he did more for Tothero than he did for Rabbit.

We can look at the game of basketball at which Rabbit was such a hero and see him as still playing a game. The basketball court and the basketball hoop are symbolic of Rabbit's need for boundaries, they are symbolic of his tidy nature - the need to complete or do a full return of an action. It is the Platonic ideal - the perfect circle. The boundary image that Updike has created for the character of Rabbit is highlighted in Rabbit, Run with Eccles' hopefully reassuring comment to Mrs Springer that Rabbit will "come back for the same reason he left. He's fastidious. He has to loop the loop".³

And then again, the basketball hoop represents the goal that Rabbit always needs before him to reinforce the concept of there being some purpose in his life - that

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 53.

²Ibid.

³Ibid. p. 127.

there is a "something" that needs to be strived for. The circular hoop of the basket is the goal bathed in light above the heads of the players and as we will discover, images of nets in these novels are associated with threats to Rabbit's search for that light, for his freedom, or else are connected with those things that are not goals, that interfere with the goal.

Rabbit has been conditioned to work within set lines, boundaries. He is used to the formalized game play where each player knows his own position and is aware of the team strategies; and this is all reflected in Rabbit's character.

He doesn't blame people for many sins but he does hate uncoordination, the root of all evil as he feels it, for without coordination there can be no order, no connecting.¹

He likes to be organized in his mind and to know the sequence, the next move. In this way he is protecting himself - knowing the subsequent moves makes him feel both safe and secure. The boundary syndrome coming easily from the basketball game is further reinforced from the symmetry of his former home environment as reflected through his mother who still "sees the world with its original four corners, her and Pop and him and Mim sitting at the kitchen table. Her tyrant love would freeze the world".² Rabbit has always looked to others, such as his

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 48.

²Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 171.

former coach to organize his moves for him and as can be seen throughout his life, this is still the case. He allows others to take the initiative with his well being but at the same time he dislikes manipulation; but where there is strength he concedes: "He had liked Tothero. Next to his mother Tothero had had the most force".¹

The basketball court is a "microcosm for Rabbit, the place where the world of perfection occurs. His intuitive sense of exactness, rightness and importance revolves on this hallowed ground".² Whilst driving towards home after seeking the imaginary goal of "the huge white sun of the South",³ observing that he has made a complete circle, Rabbit thinks about his days on the basketball court and would like to experience the feeling he once had. And feelings that arise from basketball memories still have a euphoric effect upon Rabbit that gives his actions meaning and more importantly, a "rightful" purpose. As he flees from his daughter's funeral towards the end of Rabbit, Run, he experiences "a gentle settled bumpiness that buoys him up with its reminiscence of the dodging spurting runs down a crowded court".⁴

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 16.

²Burr, Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, p. 26.

³Ibid. p. 29.

⁴Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 239.

Stemming from his basketball training we have the situation of playing within set limits or boundaries, each player with his own role to play and if the game is played well, a non-contact sport. As a former team player tells Rabbit - "You were too much of a queen to dirty your hands. No, you never touched anybody, did you?".¹ Most significantly:

Rabbit, Run is a minor epic of the spirit thirsting for room to discover and be itself, ducking, dodging, staying out of reach of everything that will pin it down and impale it on fixed, immutable laws that are not of its own making and do not consider its integrity.²

The fact that the game is a matter of strategy is reflected in Rabbit's continual obsession with escape valves. He is protecting himself from violation. As in basketball, Rabbit always feels the urge to run clear of those who crowd him and seek to tangle him. "I like everybody" he says, "I just don't like getting boxed in".³ The urge to run is explained by Tothero when he tells the secret of Rabbit's success - "I had nothing to teach you", he tells Rabbit, "I just let you run".⁴ What defeats Rabbit in real life is the absence of a counterpart for the basket in basketball. Where he had previously, a clearly defined

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 143.

²Thorburn & Eiland (ed.), John Updike. A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 16.

³Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 320.

⁴Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 52.

goal - a means of scoring points, becoming first-rate, being a success; he no longer has that goal in living with his wife Janice.¹

Rabbit likes an ordered existence - he needs to know and have defined, the boundaries within which he is to play out his life. As we first see Rabbit, the evening he leaves Janice and drives southwards, he is already displaying the traits of a "tidy" individual: "It seems to him he's the only person around here who cares about neatness. The clutter behind him in the room ... clings to his back like a tightening net".² Neatness is yet another boundary that, in its disintegration can create for Rabbit feelings of being caught - caught up by uncontrollable forces that cause him to forfeit his hold on life.

This need to be clean, tidy and neat is manifested in physical as well as mental attributes; "As a boy he was always so trim. He wasn't like other boys, sloppy. He was a neat worker", Rabbit's father tells Eccles, and "he didn't want to come into the shop ... He didn't want to get dirty".³ And even ten years on as we see him in Rabbit Redux, when he is working with his father, he

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 45.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 13.

³Ibid. p. 131.

"always wears a white shirt to work and after, as a way of cancelling the ink".¹ Tothero, in talking to the girls he and Rabbit are out with on the evening of Rabbit's return to Brewer, recalls that Rabbit "never fouled. Harry was always the idealist".² When Rabbit returns the car home after moving in with Ruth, he surveys "the apartment once more ... the rooms are filled with flavour of an awkward job, and he is glad to get out".³ And in articulating to Eccles his reasons for leaving Janice, he had felt as if "the whole business was fetching and having, all the time trying to hold this mess together she was making all the time. I don't know, it seemed like I was glued in".⁴

The fact that, for Rabbit, the objects of this world should all be neatly placed within each one's allotted boundary causes Rabbit to perhaps see in a more heightened manner than most, the incongruities of life. For example, on the evening he is out with Tothero he is faced with the mixed values of their surroundings - "A young Chinaman in a drab linen coat blocks their way past the glass counter where an American girl in a kimono sits

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 10.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 53.

³Ibid. p. 81.

⁴Ibid. p. 86.

... paintings of Paris are still on the wall"¹ and later he is "disappointed in the chopsticks; they feel like plastic instead of wood".²

We see Rabbit's preoccupation with boundaries manifested also in his workplace - in Rabbit, Run he feels secure within the parameters of Mrs Smith's garden where he "associates the trees (giant spruces) with forbidden estates; it gives him pleasure to be within their protection".³ To this view we can see why, when we meet up with him again in Rabbit Redux, he is relatively happy about his job as a linotypist, a job he has held for ten years. Updike graphically illustrates throughout this novel, Rabbit setting up pages and as we see the typeset page laid out, so we see how Rabbit likes his life to be conducted - within the confines of boundaries - tidy ends to the lines, a balanced page. When Rabbit is upset or unsettled, then this is reflected in his page layout - the number of corrections increases - and this can be amply illustrated by two lines of jumbled alphabet immediately following a phone call to his work place from Janice.⁴

How do we know he is content at work: when he is

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 47.

²Ibid. p. 50.

³Ibid. p. 112.

⁴Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 166.

in bed with Janice - wanting to make love to her, he "thinks of feathering the linotype keys, of work tomorrow, and is already there".¹ In his work Rabbit feels both cared for and secure in that the "machine stands tall and warm above him, mothering"² and where he has returned to his machine after a break it seems as if it "fits right around him".³ Working with the machine also gives Rabbit a feeling of control - not over the machine, for what they experience is a symbiotic relationship:

the machine is a baby; its demands though inflexible, are few, and once these demands are met obedience automatically follows. There is no problem of fidelity. Do for it, it does for you.⁴

Rather, the control that he has is over his own being - for Rabbit is one of Life's givers but he does not enjoy being used, manipulated. It upsets the balance and contributes to his feelings of responsibilities being traps. So we see him in Rabbit is Rich beginning to lose his equilibrium when faced with Nelson's presence - he has this feeling where his son is concerned "of being put upon, it is a suffocating sensation".⁵ Rabbit has to be free of any commitment that is not two-sided. Both parties must be in

¹ Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 29.

² Ibid. p. 31.

³ Ibid. p. 33.

⁴ Ibid. p. 31.

⁵ Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 88.

control through their relative independence of each other. That is why he has this sense of well being with his machine.

The use of the game boundary as a thematic line is again reinforced when we meet up with Rabbit in Rabbit is Rich. In his position as a Toyota dealer he finds there is satisfaction in being contained within the strictures of a brand dealership - it means he does not have to think, plan or make decisions past the rules that have been laid down for him to play by - "The cars sell themselves, is his philosophy".¹ Thus when his son starts reading up a handbook on automobile dealership, Rabbit says to him that it "tells you more than you need to know".² Rabbit is content within the lines laid down for him: "Toyoto insists we sell everything at their list so there's not much room for finagling, and that saves you a lot of headaches in my opinion".³ The need of balance in Rabbit's world is seen to be under threat by his son's presence around the lot. Rabbit is scared he will intrude into his world. He does not want Nelson working for the firm. He tells Starvos: "I don't want him in. He makes me uncomfortable" adding that "they have a nice symmetrical

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 9.

²Ibid. p. 108.

³Ibid.

arrangement here".¹

To be organized physically and mentally is for Rabbit, to cocoon himself against attack of the Self. He has to know what his next move is to be - reminiscent of his basketball days, and these moves must be executed as economically as possible. Before he attempts his trip to the South he is faced with the decision of picking up his car or son first and given no clear direction, we already see the net image appearing - that net image which equates with feelings of entrapment throughout these novels:

He tries to sort out picking up his car and then his kid. Or should he pick up the kid first? He wants more to see the kid ... He had better go for the car first and pick the kid up with it. But he doesn't want to do it this way. He just doesn't. The problem knits in front of² him and he feels sickened by the intricacy.²

So what we have with Rabbit, is an individual who needs to be tidy, who sees boundaries as containing harmony and shutting out disorder. And with the disintegration of such boundaries, a feeling of being caught accompanied by web and net images, that cause him to seek escape. When Rabbit makes his escapes he is always looking for direction, signposts to reassure himself that he is on the right road. He does not like to diverge - his is a quest for a straight

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 120.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 14.

road - a road that will lead him into the safety of another boundary. He is a game player after all. "The curving highway seems a wide straight road that has opened up in front of him. There is nothing he wants to do but go down it".¹ When he decides to return to Janice and move back into the apartment he finds that the "straight path is made smooth. Mr Springer has been paying rent on the apartment all along it turns out".² The idea of signposts in Rabbit's life is reinforced by his enjoyment of the game of golf - it is a game that is laid out with a definite route that the players must follow - "They pick up their bags and walk the way a wooden arrow tells them".³ It is a game that keeps the players detached from each other.

While Rabbit needs boundaries and looks for the security that he feels is contained within them, he at the same time is creating barriers that prevent an easy, fearless transition between them. He feels shut off from the existences of others', "the better homes begin ... guarded by conifers, protected by treaties with banks".⁴ It is then that we see the need of intervention by the other characters, who reach out and draw him back to where they

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 167.

²Ibid. p. 177.

³Ibid. p. 108.

⁴Ibid. p. 178.

consider he belongs; and for Rabbit it has to be enough that he has not only recognized his need to escape but also the fact that he needs too, the security of the familiar. But each time he is, as it were, "brought back", his soul shrinks that little bit more. When he returns to Janice at her parents' home after the death of their baby "the tone of the house has changed; he feels everything has been rearranged slightly to make a space into which he can fit by making himself small".¹ He is aware that he has broken convention by fleeing, but while another lighter, brighter world had beckoned he was able to ignore this fact.

What Rabbit does find hard to come to terms with, is the fact that though he breaks convention and should therefore expect to be treated as a miscreant - nobody appears to want to chastise him: "He is getting slightly annoyed at the way the minister isn't bowling him out or something; he doesn't seem to know his job".² This brings home to Rabbit the fact that he is not very important in the scheme of things - that people are able to survive without his presence. While he is at the hospital waiting for Janice to have her baby he "gets the idea he's in a police station and these other two men are the cops who

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 224.

²Ibid. p. 84.

have made the arrest. It seems they ignore him pointedly".¹ Everything is made too easy for him he realizes - when he strays, when he refutes social values; he envisages as a just recognition for his actions, at least some form of punishment. It would then at least give his actions some validity. Instead society rides him fairly easy and thus to justify himself he becomes the flagellator: "Since he refused to get her pregnant again the murder and guilt have become all his".²

When Mr Springer tells Rabbit that there will be no manslaughter charge over the death of Rabbit's daughter he asks "Why don't they just lock me up?".³ He needs to know that someone has noticed his actions - because they do not, these actions have lost their meaning. It disgusts him to "feel the net of law slither from him. They just won't do it for you, they just won't take you off the hook".⁴ Ten years on in Rabbit Redux, we see the same attendant feelings. Following Jill's death in his burnt out house Rabbit sees that "again in his life the net of law has slipped from him. He knows he is a criminal, yet is never caught. Sickness sinks through his body like

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 158.

²Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 37.

³Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 232.

⁴Ibid.

soot".¹ What Rabbit wants is the control situation of the basketball court again. He wants to be told what to do, he wants to stay within the framework of the law. So once again we see Rabbit's need to be cocooned and not have to face the necessity of being self-motivated; and if it is hate that will achieve this security for him, he is willing to accept this price for his safety:

The house again fills with the unspoken thought that he is a murderer. He accepts the thought gratefully; it is true, he is, he is, and hate suits him better than forgiveness. Immersed in hate he doesn't have to do anything; he can be paralysed, and the rigidity of hatred makes a kind of shelter for him.²

What helps to draw Rabbit back to his familiar environment is a fear of the unknown, of being exposed by the light and openness that he has sought. For exposure means vulnerability. Thus, while escaping, Rabbit hopes to be caught - he wants to be returned and this unconscious need to be found and once again enclosed in the familiar, travels with him. "He doesn't know, what to do, where to go, what will happen. The thought that he doesn't know seems to make him infinitely small and impossible to capture. It's smallness fills him like a vastness".³

A perceptible difference between Rabbit, Run and Rabbit Redux is that when institutions are breaking down,

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 282.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 231.

³Ibid. p. 248.

for Rabbit the answer is no longer to flee from a trap making situation but rather to wait for the situation to compound and self-destruct. For Rabbit is, as he was a decade before, still an unmotivated individual and he will not force an issue. "I don't believe in force. I don't like contact sports".¹ Now when presented with escape valves such as Janice leaving home, his house destroyed, his dismissal from work, the support of his mother - none of these can now sufficiently motivate him as they would have in Rabbit, Run where his release had to be triggered by events. They no longer instigate action on his part, move him to take the chance to discover; for he has come to the realization that what he had searched for was too intangible, too life-threatening to continue his pursuit of it. He now uses the dependence of others as his crutch and also his excuse for not taking action. In Rabbit, Run by his letting go, death occurred - his daughter died, as did some of his hope. Now he is afraid to go, for it means death or a falling down. And by the time we renew our acquaintance with Rabbit in Rabbit is Rich he has almost convinced himself that there never was anything to search for and he "suddenly hates people who seem to know; they would keep us blind to the fact that there is nothing to know. We are each of us filled with a perfect blackness".²

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 313.

²Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 391.

The way Rabbit thinks, is still very indicative of his basketball days. When he meets Starvos several weeks after Janice had left him for Starvos, Rabbit gains the impression that he is "competing" again and what he "has to do is hang loose and let Starvos make the move".¹ And as he becomes aware of the other player's intentions, he gains the upper hand, he can relax somewhat - enjoy the anticipation mounting as to what his own move will be - he is in control of the situation while the "game is on ice".² He is comfortable while he is in control but he lets his guard down - allows Starvos to infiltrate his defence and he "doesn't like the way the game has started to slide: there is a hole he is trying to plug and can't".³ After some counter moves, Rabbit finds that "Starvos has sneaked in for that lay-up and the game is in overtime".⁴ Later on in the same novel, when Rabbit feels that he has discovered his unwelcome lodger's true identity and thereby outsmarted him, he thinks to himself that having "scored, you put your head down and run back up the floor; but with that feeling inside, of having made a mark that can't be rubbed out".⁵ It gives him a good feeling.

¹ Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 157.

² Ibid. p. 159.

³ & ⁴ Ibid. p. 160.

⁵ Ibid. p. 196.

CHAPTER II

The Self

Rabbit doesn't want to tell him anything. The more he tells, the more he loses. He's safe inside his own skin, he doesn't want to come out. This guy's whole game is to get him put into the open where he can be manipulated.

Foremost and above all, Rabbit has the need to protect himself and thus perhaps the strongest boundary of all is that one which he has erected around himself to protect his vulnerability. Rabbit is in an environment that has fewer and less clear-cut standards and ideals than before. A world and a country that relies less and less on those institutions and principles that have governed Rabbit's earlier years; and whilst Rabbit is a player with his peers in this contemporary world - he has a need to experience life neatly intact. The fact that many values and institutions are disintegrating causes a fear in Rabbit - a fear that forces him to flee. And in the same respect, if the same were to happen to his own

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 102.

integrity, if the boundaries of Self were assaulted - we would witness the devouring of the core of Rabbit's existence. Thus the more intense is his desire to retain the intactness of himself. By keeping himself "clean" from the assaults on Man's existence we have this feeling of apartness - of Rabbit removed from his contemporaries, cut off. That Rabbit withdraws to protect himself is symbolized by metaphors of caves, darkness, sealing up and of sleep.

The clangour of the body shop comes up softly. Its noise comforts him, tells him he is hidden and safe, that while he hides men are busy nailing the world down, and toward the disembodied sounds his heart makes in darkness a motion of love.¹

Ten years on as we see him in Rabbit Redux, he still needs this assurance of being safe within the world - "Since infancy Rabbit sleeps best when others are up, upright like nails holding down the world, like lamp-posts, street signs, dandelion stems ...".²

But it is here we have an insight into Rabbit's ambivalent nature. His attitude to the "burrow" situation is a need to feel cocooned, protected by the rest of the world, by values and institutions; and at the same time a need to be protective - to place boundaries around himself and those institutions he values (he gains security from

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 40.

²Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 28.

such boundaries) but, at the same time, he has created barriers that as a lone player, he has difficulty in transcending. And so we have him experiencing feelings of isolation, of being shut out, of being underneath, confined and surrounded by darkness in cave-like situations that tend to make him want to break through this barrier - to surface into light. In Rabbit's need to seek light, some brightness and the right road; we have analogies of upward movement as he seeks. He has an upward vision that sustains him throughout Rabbit, Run. Thus it is movement towards sunshine he sought in heading towards Florida.

The need to protect himself is a pervading aspect of Rabbit's character. In order to remain secure he will attempt to withdraw himself away from disintegrating boundaries. If his defences are down he is vulnerable, a relic of his basketball days. He has this need to create a boundary around himself against chaotic forces and a manipulation of himself by others. When Rabbit returns to Brewer after his night of heading south we have a physical manifestation of this protection of Self as he awaits Tothero whilst napping in the car:

He doesn't move to the back seat because that would make him vulnerable; he wants to be able to drive away in a second if he must (and he) becomes anxious about the car windows ... the window above his head is open a crack and he cranks it tight and pushes down all the lock buttons. This security relaxes him hopelessly.¹

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 34-35.

Rabbit has this need to enclose himself, to draw back into the protection of Self now that he no longer has the security of youth but is alone in the responsibility of his adulthood. In Rabbit, Run after the birth of his daughter and his reunion with Janice he has again taken on the responsibility of family. He is at peace with the seeming restoration of the institution of family; but the fact that there are people once again dependent upon him means that his need to be self protective is heightened, and we see him "curled near one edge (of the bed as) he draws backward into sleep like a turtle drawing into his shell. Sleep this night is ... a cave inside himself, into which he shrinks while the claws of the bear rattle like rain outside".¹

The concept of being contained and safe flows through the Rabbit novels. After his first night with Ruth he feels he has to return Janice's car - she has more need of it than he does. As he drives it over, the car "smells secure: rubber and dust and painted metal hot in the sun. A sheath for the knife of himself".² The use of the car metaphor is a continuing one - the safety of enclosed spaces is even felt by the more mature Rabbit in Rabbit is Rich as "he sits snug in his sealed and well assembled car".³

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 167.

²Ibid. p. 79.

³Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 33.

The fact that Rabbit tries to protect himself and gives us the analogies of enclosures, of being sealed up; also means that the barriers these boundaries have created need to be overcome by Rabbit for him to participate fully in the wider sphere of his existence. This attempting to break through, to surface, is a very consistent theme here for Rabbit is a lonely man - a man isolated by his own lack of purpose and, when we first meet up with him, feeling rejected by his mother, belittled by his employment and despised by his in-laws. Even in Rabbit Redux after a further ten years of "family" life with Janice and Nelson, he is still alone, apart from the existences of others'. When they, as a family, go out, throughout the "evening he has this sensation of nobody hearing him, of his spirit muffled in pulpy insulation, so he talks all the louder and more insistently".¹

When Eccles rings through to Rabbit to tell him Janice has started to have her baby it has followed an evening when Rabbit experiences some shame in his relationship with Ruth and the opportunity to retreat out of a situation where the companionship that had been, is no longer; is to be grasped. It seemed to Rabbit that "Eccles had reached for him, it felt like, out of the

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 36.

ground".¹ And later, in recalling this telephone conversation, he "remembers nothing except this sense of being reached".² He has been brought to the surface out from where he has been "hiding" in the snugness of his relationship with Ruth. Make no mistake though - it is purely Rabbit's decision to finally surface, for with the idea of birth comes all those aspects that Rabbit associates with his seeking and upward vision - light, hope and meaning to life.

Later on, at the hospital, Rabbit feels isolated by his fear of how Janice is coping, for everything "seems unreal that is outside of his sensations".³ And it is not until Mrs Springer verbally attacks Rabbit for his presence there that he actually feels brought into the situation.

Mrs Springer's attack,

though it ached to hurt him, (was) the first thing anybody (had) said to Harry since this began that seems to fit the enormity of the event going on somewhere behind the screen of hospital soap-smell. Until her words he felt alone on a dead planet encircling the great gaseous sun of Janice's labour; her cry, though a cry of hate, pierced his solitude.

And with breaking through, with surfacing comes a

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 154.

²Ibid. p. 155.

³Ibid. p. 159.

⁴Ibid. p. 162.

reaffirmation for Rabbit, of the purpose of life. When he left his home and began travelling south Rabbit was to initially feel this way:

So perfect, so consistent is the freedom into which the clutter of the world has been vaporized by the simple trigger of his decision, that all ways seem equally good, all movements will put the same caressing pressure on his skin.¹

For Rabbit, breaking through, surfacing is a form of release "and then you're out, not forgotten at first, just out, and it feels good and cool and free".² No longer to feel pressure upon him. Surfacing is also a form of rebirth - "Rabbit wishes for a cigarette to go with the washed feeling inside and remembers he gave up smoking and feels cleaner still".³

The paradox that is contained within our protagonist is that whilst protecting himself through the erection of boundaries, he at the same time creates a barrier to all those institutions that he seeks to belong to, such as family, stable man-woman relationships and American society. Many critics, while recognizing that Rabbit does not belong to the social groups or norms that govern our lives, maintain that he is willing to remain on the outside of such groups in his basic need to remain a "star" player,

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 42.

²Ibid. p.6.

³Ibid. p. 21.

and to shy away from his societal responsibilities. But we would counter this by the premise that Rabbit's quest is for a place in the team. The reality is, that he wants to belong - it is just that he is helpless to find a way of making the transition. What he finds hard to come to terms with and which is a basic thread throughout the trilogy, is that transition across from the untouchable player to the team member. Continually, what Rabbit wants is to have it all but without giving up what he already holds. "It is remarkable that so many people do accept him and try to help him".¹ Rabbit feels very much alone in not being included in the "team". Basically he wants to belong, to be included. See how he sits on the side-line after the death of his daughter - we see him with his son sitting out on the kerb, the Springer house behind them, feeling excluded from the mourning party. However, in wanting to belong to a team, for Rabbit it has to be a team playing by the accepted rules or the norms as laid down by society.

We might consider, with Rabbit's pervading concern for self protection and the maintenance of a distance, that he displays egotistical traits; but this is not wholly true as we learn to understand his character. Jill once commented that he did not think much of himself, to

¹Burr, Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, p. 92.

which he replied "that once the basketball stopped, I suppose not".¹ He likes, or is certainly affected by the fact that some people do things for him but he does not take it as his inalienable right.

the thought of her city-girl's paper-pale feet bare on the stones for his sake makes his heart, fevered with exertion, sob and he clings to her tough body with the weakness of grief ... 'My queen', he says, 'my good horse'.²

That he once felt special is not disputed: "He came to her (Mary Ann) as a winner and that was the feeling he missed since".³ But contrary to critics of Rabbit, he does not feel that he is still special and therefore owed something by the rest of the world, and that any association with second-rate people will inevitably make himself second-rate. To the contrary - if anything, he considers that he short changes others by his being so ordinary: "She was the best of them all because she was the one he brought most to".⁴

That he can be mindless, immature and unaware of the havoc he plays with the lives of others is all too apparent but the accusation that he is without some awareness of his faults and shortcomings can be belied by Rabbit's own thoughts over Ruth: "For him, that was what was rich,

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 174.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 92.

³Ibid. p. 160.

⁴Ibid.

changing herself for him when he was worth nothing, less than nothing, he was a menace, for all his mildness".¹

But though no longer great or special, Rabbit still feels that he has the right to escape if he can from situations and institutions that have turned into traps and which threaten to squeeze out whatever remains of his own integrity, of the life that his inner self still retains with its memories of childhood and basketball days and his still hopeful aspirations. He may no longer be special but he need not be lifeless either. He needs to know that he has a place in the divine order of Creation and one of his quests in seeking security is discovering where he belongs.

What Rabbit does however, aware that he is "caged by his own sense of selfish desires, is count on the fact that others will play his game, play it without hindering his nebulous quest".² More generally, Rabbit is expectant of others to "accept him as he is without trying to accomodate himself to the situation he enters. In so doing Rabbit accomplishes just one thing: alienation".³

The need to feel enclosed, protected from the unknown is a very Puritan quality - outside of the

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 146.

²Burr, Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run, p 92.

³Ibid.

boundaries that he knows and is comfortable with, he displays fear - fear of the unknown. This is exemplified in his ambivalent attitude to Nature. He appreciates the unsullied aspects of life, those parts of his environment not yet affected by progress. On his way south he feels himself being drawn into Philadelphia and makes decided efforts to avoid it, "he hates Philadelphia. Dirtiest city in the world, they live on poisoned water, you can taste the chemicals".¹ What he is seeking from his environment instead is "orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women".² To Rabbit's mind it "seemed simple enough".³ But Rabbit is frightened of an untamed Nature, of the unknown, the foreign or different, the untouched. When he describes Mt. Judge, the mountain which separates Brewer from the town of Mt. Judge, we begin immediately to understand his relationship to Nature and the fear it can instill:

in long patches of forgotten pine plantation
the needle-hushed floor of land glides up
and up, on and on, under endless tunnels of
dead green and you seem to have passed through
silence into something worse.⁴

Again, as he travels south, he passes in the dark and just

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 22.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. p. 16.

outside of Churchtown, an Amish buggy and catches a glimpse of a bearded man and a woman in black,

in this horsedrawn shadow glaring like devils. The beard inside the buggy like hairs in a nostril. He tries to think of the good life these people lead, of the way they keep clear of all this phoney business, this twentieth-century vitamin racket, but in his heart they stay devils.

Another side of his attitude towards Nature is what he experiences only a few miles out of Brewer - the feeling that he is in another world, a world that "smells differently, smells older, of nooks and pockets in the ground that nobody's poked into yet".² But this image of the unused and unsullied is to only temporarily affect Rabbit. It is a reaction to his feeling of release. What this unknown eventually does to him is capture him up in his own net of fear of what lies beyond. After travelling for several more hours he begins to experience the trap of Nature -

Tree trunks and low limbs are all his head-lights pick up; the scrabbling shadows spider backward through the web of wilderness into a black core where he fears his probe of light will stir some beast or ghost. He supports speed³ with prayer, praying that the road not stop.

What Rabbit needs from Nature is that it be controlled, bounded by the perimeter of technology - just

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 25.

²Ibid. pp. 23-24.

³Ibid. p. 30.

the knowledge of human interference is sufficient - a ribbon of road, a handrail; for he is just as equally affected by the destruction of Nature through technology. Here we have Nature as an institution that has as its boundary civilization and as we will continue to see, it is when these enclaves are assaulted or begin to disintegrate that Rabbit becomes distraught with fear at the thought of losing the security he feels is contained within the boundaries. For without the order of boundaries, chaos reigns. Thus the blatant assault upon Nature by technology is equally antithetical to him - "the mountain lifts a broad green spine, two miles long north to south, assaulted by gravel pits and cemeteries and new developments".¹ On his return to Brewer in the early morning, approaching from the south he sees,

as a treeless waste of industry, shoe factories
and bottling plants and company parking lots
and knitting mills converted to electronics
parts and elephantine gas tanks lifting above
trash-filled swamp land²

Both Nature and civilization have as their boundary each other and the dilemma for Rabbit - what he has to come to terms with, is how to survive in an existence where perhaps these boundaries are nonexistent or one has encroached upon the other to the detriment of its host.

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 16.

²Ibid. p. 33.

Rabbit needs Nature in its place, contained by the idea of civilization. Coupled with Rabbit's fear of the unknown is a feeling of exposure when the aspects of light and of Nature that he seeks, are confronted. This then causes a feeling of vulnerability which in turn makes him fearful for himself; for the loss of his protective boundary, that last bastion against the inane of civilization. What Rabbit fears is that assault that society puts upon humanity that causes Man to rely less and less upon an innate sense of rightness - "All I know is what's inside me. That's all I have".¹ - and rely more and more upon arbitrary societal values that have little relevance to actual survival or to Man's full existence. As Rabbit tells Ruth towards the close of Rabbit Run - "I don't know any of these answers. All I know is what feels right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to. Sometimes nothing does".²

The boundaries of Nature and the Self are very much intertwined - Rabbit is often at his most vulnerable when placed in confrontation with Nature. That he has lost control of his perspective when this occurs becomes obvious and yet as often as not it has been Rabbit that has instigated this confrontation, often in an effort to find answers. When he takes Ruth for a walk up the mountain it

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 87-88.

²Ibid. p. 246.

is as if he is attempting to surface. They climb the mountain, he with a certain urgency and also expectation but he then faces the question of why he brought them up here. To see what? This has been a search, a quest to seek affirmation of his belief that life itself has a boundary contained by the presence of God - "It seems plain, standing here, that if there is this floor there is a ceiling ...".¹ But then he becomes frightened of the space and the feeling of being able to see beyond his immediate environment into the lives of all of the town's homes and he asks "What is he doing here, standing on air? Why isn't he home?",² and he then begs Ruth to put her arm around him. Again he is on the outside of an institution that he does need to belong to and yet cannot find the way to do so in living with Janice or even Ruth. He is not a part of a community or even, anymore, part of this town's folklore and this is what he envies in viewing Brewer from on high for she is the "mother of a hundred thousand, shelter of love, ingenious and luminous artifact",³ and he appears to be on the outside of her, cut off.

For Rabbit, boundaries protect - within these the players have certain rules to follow, moves to make and a

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 93.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

specific goal to achieve. When boundaries begin to disintegrate it means the players are no longer playing by the rules and consequently the world becomes chaotic, untidy and for Rabbit this causes fear, for essentially he is a tidy individual. He likes to know the accepted moves - the unknown route is a source of fear. When he flees to escape the chaos he is then attempting to intrude into another world around which he has also placed boundaries and which become barriers themselves when he moves alone or without a coach's advice. The boundary of fear is symbolic - it is fear that causes him to flee but it is also fear (through being alone in uncharted waters such as the road south to Florida) that makes him vulnerable and which brings him back full circle to the security but also the compromise of what he has initially fled from.

It is not that he does not want to experience other environments that holds him back but rather he is incapable of doing so without companionship - without the help of other players. His life has lost direction when we first meet him - he has no immediate goals and no longer has he crowds cheering him on. He lacks the impetus to "play" life as he played the game of basketball: "'Oh my Rabbit!, Ruth exclaimed in a fond final breath. 'You just wander, don't you?'"¹ Rabbit needs a goal, a purpose in life

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 89.

and where he cannot see one he is lost, stranded - the real world does not tell him what the "something" that wants him to find it, is. He has the idea "that somewhere he'd find an opening",¹ but he does not know how to recognize it. He came close to it once when playing golf with Eccles:

He doesn't care about anything except getting out of this mess ... the ball makes this hesitation the ground of a final leap; with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling. 'That's it!' he cries and turning to Eccles with a smile of aggrandizement, repeats, 'That's it'.²

So the urge to run and the will to achieve are without specific direction except to move him away from obvious threats and traps which hinder his freedom of mind. He needs guidance and in running he is looking for direction.

Basically Rabbit is unambitious - it is not that he doesn't wish for things - to travel, to experience - but he is an unmotivated individual who is unable to initiate action for himself. The circumstances have to present themselves to him through a release of the onus of any responsibility that has been placed upon him or, he needs to be guided or coached as to his moves - it was Tothero in his basketball days, the U.S. government in giving him his only experience of travel before his Caribbean sojourn

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 225.

²Ibid. p. 109.

as he reaches some form of maturity in Rabbit is Rich, Janice "causes" him to become a husband and father, Eccles moves him towards gardening, his father towards his becoming a typesetter and Mr Springer formed him into a car salesman. Rabbit's philosophy is "that the world runs on push. Rabbit's feeling has been that if it doesn't happen by itself it's not worth making happen".¹

What occurs in his most dramatic flight out of Brewer is that, coupled with his fear of the unknown and exposure to he knows not what, is the fact that he runs out of external motivational forces - he is unable to create them himself. He needs external signposts as well as his own internal propulsion to guide him in the direction he only vaguely knows that he is seeking. Rabbit respects the positive actions of others - it is just that he is unable to be so positive himself unless he sees the game play before him - laid out with its accompanying moves or rules; thus we see him throughout the first novel like "an unsteered boat, (where) he keeps scraping against the same rocks: his mother's ugly behaviour, his father's gaze of desertion, Ruth's silence the last time he saw her ...".²

It is only when he becomes frightened, fearful at the breakdown of an institution, be it that of the family unit, of Nature, of society or of the American ideal;

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 374.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 186.

that he is sufficiently motivated to look to escape and ultimately for a fresh direction in life - hence the use of the road map in his flight south and the use of God through the medium of Eccles to give his life meaning. In Rabbit Redux we have the use of Skeeter and his books on American black history to put the crumbling moral values of America into some perspective. The need to re-establish a viable moral framework is a central thematic concern in this novel and in so far as such a framework exists it somewhat approves of a temperamental black militant while deftly putting down a patient, unassuming protagonist.¹ Finally, in Rabbit is Rich, the reference authority is the Consumer Reports, which enables Rabbit to keep a hold on the idea that there are still some standards, still some reference points by which one might base one's life upon and ultimately judge others by.

When Rabbit feels those things by which he has based his life upon, begin to break down, he almost instinctively feels trapped. That he feels trapped is not enough however, to cause him to flee. He needs opportunity for escape, opportunity that needs to be given him by the unconscious actions of others who take it upon themselves to shoulder his responsibilities. He passes the ball to another player whilst he departs the court.

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 7.

Two thoughts comfort him, let a little light through the dense pack of impossible alternatives. Ruth has parents, and she will let his baby live ... Ruth and Janice both have parents;¹ with this thought he dissolves both of them.

Coming back to Rabbit's own need of boundaries - in order never to feel trapped, he will always be aware within a situation, of a need for an escape route - a means of escape whereby he can then protect himself from a commitment to others, from others drawing on him and sapping his soul. He can sense when he is in danger and this is especially true in Rabbit is Rich as we see him renew his acquaintance with Ruth. He faces her with his knowledge of their daughter but while she will not admit that he has a daughter, Rabbit begins to realize the danger he is in - not from discovering a daughter but in making contact again with her mother: "Ruth is lonely, he sees, and willing to talk, this makes him uneasy".² He wants to keep his distance from Ruth - his seeking her out was in order to boost his own sense of well being by adding the knowledge that he had a "perfect" daughter; it was not to saddle himself with a commitment to Ruth. He is aware that she "likes his saying her name, he should be careful about saying it".³ When Ruth tells him Annabelle is not his, it

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 248.

²Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 409.

³Ibid. p. 411.

is what he wants to hear, whether it is the truth or not. "She's not yours" Ruth tells him and Rabbit replies "'O.K. If you say so'. In his surge of relief he stands".¹

Rabbit feels safe and protected within the boundaries he has conceptualized but there has to be a means of escape - he feels trapped otherwise and being trapped means his defences are down and he is vulnerable. When he is in a situation where he feels trapped one can be sure that it is a situation where the order of that institution is beginning to show cracks or has broken down - where the players have forgotten their places on the team. Note in Rabbit Redux, on the bus ride home, how uncomfortable Rabbit feels in his proximity to the blacks. They are intruding on his America and yet now he shows a maturity that was lacking in Rabbit, Run, for instead of fleeing the situation, he accepts the fact of Skeeter being in his home - no matter how uncomfortable it may make him feel. At least it is some excitement in his fairly pallid existence. And he soon looks to Skeeter for answers to the myriad of questions that constantly assail him in looking for a purpose in Life. "Skeeter - an unlikeable antagonist is converted into a saviour figure whilst Updike can show disapproval of Rabbit by placing him in juxtaposition with Skeeter - creating an emotionally frozen, morally enervated white comparing unfavourably with

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 411.

the vitality and system of values necessary to human action and survival".¹

The paradox for Rabbit is that, through his need to protect himself - because of the fear that disintegrating values will bring chaotic forces into play - he becomes a man alone, isolated and alienated. He has an inability to experience without fear because of the unknown qualities of such experiences. He needs a companion and he seeks this constantly throughout the novels. Rabbit has literally no one to turn to at the end of Rabbit, Run except a frightening forest, fraught with alienation. Group solidarity is the one trait in Man which can support him in his hour of need - but for Rabbit is this type of companionship that he lacks, only coming to some form of awareness towards the end of Rabbit is Rich that between him and Janice there is a bond - an underlying bond that takes the form of a certain degree of mutual understanding and a predictability that gives Rabbit hope that there is stability in the world and that its chaotic forces are under control. "What more can you ask of a wife in a way than that she stick around and see with you what happens next?".²

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 6.

²Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 240.

The need to communicate on the most intimate level, not sexually but mentally, is apparent in many of the relationships Rabbit attempts to establish. With Ruth, he feels love is shallow compared with what he has the potential to give her:

There is no love in it, love that glances and glides along the skin, he is unconscious of their skins, it is her heart he wants to grind into his own, to comfort her completely.¹

And in trying to tell her, he cries out "against her smothering throat that is not her body he wants, not the machine, but her, her".² To communicate only on a sexual level, is for Rabbit, to perform in an arena of manipulation and in performing he becomes vulnerable. He dislikes being used. In Rabbit, Run, he feels Janice has an "unreal idea of what love is. She exaggerates its importance, has imagined it into something rare and precious she's entitled to half of when all he wants is to get rid of it ...".³ Thus he is not unhappy when in Rabbit is Rich Janice, lulled by love and carried off by liquor, goes to sleep as he makes love to her. "He is not displeased to be thus stranded, another consciousness in bed is a responsibility, a snag in the flow of his thoughts".⁴ What Rabbit sees as love is what he recalls his relationship

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 62.

²Ibid. p. 65.

³Ibid. p. 201.

⁴Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 54.

was with Ruth, now heightened with the memory of time:

He doesn't know if he loved her or not, but with her he had known love, had experienced that cloudy inflation of self which makes us infants again and tips each moment with a plain excited purpose.¹

This is not an emotion that he experiences in Rabbit Redux.

Rather, he feels that in -

Rising, working, there is no reason anymore, no reason for anything, no reason why not, nothing to breathe but a sour gas bottled in empty churches, nothing to rise by; he lives in a tight well² whose dank sides squeeze and paralyse him.

So he turns and clutches at reality in the form of Peggy Fosnacht. He can no longer afford to look for escape routes out of dark, dank places - no longer does he search for the light which had for him, represented "right" ten years before. Where he once looked for the intangible, he is now firmly bound up within the court of a middle-class American societal existence. What he has done for a short time, is to forget to play by the rules of that society. Having a young girl stay in his house is bearable by society's standards. But to have a black man staying there also is not permissable - his father says so, his neighbours reiterate it - "It's the girl and the black together",³ Showalter states. That situation is not to be tolerated.

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 106.

²Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 245.

³Ibid. p. 249.

He has forgotten the game play and now he is on the defensive - when he feels his house (which represents himself, the player) is under attack from the neighbourhood he "gets into bed in his underwear, in case he must rise and run".¹ He has this premonition that his home is under attack, not by its alien occupants but by society - from the time two of his neighbours accost him on his way home from work, with veiled threats if he does not get rid of Skeeter. When Rabbit learns that the neighbourhood children have been looking in his windows; he feels assaulted and vulnerable and there is a need to once again protect that what he values and he therefore places a boundary around himself and his home; he tries to look through the houses that surround him "to his own, to protect it".² And with the unease growing, he erects physical barriers also in the form of replacing his screens to storm windows to ward off the disintegration of his present lifestyle. It is a lifestyle that has not given him enjoyment as such but at least some "life" and a form of rejoinder to balance what Janice has done to him. Rabbit is not a vindictive man, he is not sufficiently motivated to be so, but the actions that have been occurring within his home environment have, in his eyes, helped to

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 259.

²Ibid. p. 247.

redress the balance somewhat and given him some control over the situation between himself and Janice.

CHAPTER III

Traps and Escapes

Rabbit freezes, standing looking at his faint yellow shadow on the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in¹ a trap. It seems certain. He goes out.

The three novels have as their major thematic line, Rabbit needing security within the concept of a burrow, of an enclosure bounded by Nature, society, family and philosophies; but these institutions turn to traps when Rabbit experiences the disintegration of any or all of these entities such as the breakdown of family relations, the lack of a belief system or the fallibility of America. In Rabbit's world there is a fine line drawn between being bound and being trapped and Updike manages most skilfully and successfully to demonstrate Rabbit's awareness of the breakdown of his boundaries of safety. Within these boundaries Rabbit likes tidiness - this tidiness can often be seen in the form of role play - that each person play the role Rabbit has been conditioned to expect from that individual. So a coach should remain the coach and not

¹ Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 14.

become an old man and a lecher. Persons encased in role models are predictable and that is what Rabbit needs - to know that everything is in position. He becomes afraid of those uncontrollable elements found in situations: He does not then know what the next move should be - who will make it. There is a general lack of awareness of any formulated play tactic. Allied with his fear of uncontrolled play is the wish to avoid confrontation.

We can first look at the institution of family: Rabbit was brought up in a middle-class suburban style with each family member playing his or her own role and Rabbit sees himself playing his father's role. But what he is beginning to experience on our initial acquaintance with him, is a lack of substance to his married life - "You get the feeling you're in your coffin before they've taken your blood out".¹ He is alone even while Janice and Nelson share his existence. The companionship is not forthcoming. As he complains to Janice later on in Rabbit, Run - "All you did was watch television and drink all the time".² The television is the communicator in their flat. The media is a predominant feature of these novels; it helps to reinforce Rabbit's philosophical views and acts as a modern day Christian creed for him to follow. It is

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 174.

²Ibid.

also a very tangible link for him with what he considers to be the real world. He needs the media for its voice, for Rabbit is a lonely individual - he is removed from the other characters; partly through the boundary he has created for his self protection, partly through the existentialist qualities of the novels, particularly in *Rabbit, Run*, and partly through the other characters' abject lack of interest in Rabbit, the inner being. As Janice tries to explain Rabbit to Starvos: "He put his life into rules he feels melting away now. I mean, I know he thinks he's missing something, he's always reading the paper and watching the news".¹

The feeling of alienation from his family is graphically demonstrated in *Rabbit, Run* by the fact that, when he tries to open his door on arriving home, suffering from unusual exertion after his game of basketball with the boys in the street, followed then by the climb up the stairs to the top floor; the key scratches at his attempt to fit it in the lock and yet his wife is sitting on the other side, and this affects him considerably. "Locked doors. It rankles; his hand trembling in the lock like some old wreck and her sitting in here listening to the scratching".²

¹Updike, *Rabbit Redux*, p. 51.

²Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, p. 9.

When Rabbit feels trapped, he looks for escape. The act of flight is not a mindless movement however, nor is it simply a selfish one on Rabbit's part. At points when Rabbit seems to be at his most selfish or irresponsible he is usually simply using a reasonable and true logic, but one which does not conform to the conventional norms of encompassing social responsibility. When Ruth asks Rabbit why he does not support his wife, he answers "Why should I? Her father's rolling in it".¹ Rabbit sees him as much more able (and willing) than Rabbit himself, to provide for Janice. At such moments, he is opting out of the system and considering in a realistic way, the resources which remain to people.² If we look at each instance that he, as it were, foresakes his responsibilities as critics have too readily maintained he does; we will see rather, that the total rejection is, in actuality, merely a transference of responsibility.

When he departs his home initially, he does not go with any notion of escape. That he is aware that he is in the trap of a crumbling marriage situation is obvious; but his immediate intention is not to flee but to collect Nelson and then the car. It is as he approaches his former home that he becomes more aware of the need to do

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 122.

²Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 49.

something; he is "pricked by an indefinite urgency".¹ Walking the distance to his parents' home, Updike shows us Rabbit going downhill all the way, at the same time that memories of his youth assail him - ascending telephone poles, climbing Mt. Judge - and here Updike cleverly balances Rabbit's downward movement, with its analogy of being pulled further into the trap; with the climbing, upward movements of youth. Because Rabbit is basically an unmotivated individual who needs a coach, or signposts to provide the impetus for movement, he finds at times like these that he is in a state of limbo, and it is then that he has to reassure himself of belonging, of being in contact with the world and so we see him at this time of indecision, of unformulated movement - every now and then touch with his hand the "rough bark of a tree or the dry twigs of a hedge, to give himself the small answer of texture".²

The imagery of ascent and descent permeates the novel, given situational basis in the mountainous setting. It often correlates with whether Rabbit is escaping the restrictions of socially directed responsibility (upward) or being drawn back into the complex system of human involvements (downward). When at the end of the book

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 17.

²Ibid. p. 14.

Rabbit runs from the funeral, a humanistic ritual of shared responsibility, shared guilt and shared grief - he runs "uphill with broad strength" because "only by going downhill can he be returned to the others".¹

Rabbit has a foreshadow of his intention to retreat from his family situation in the way he stealthily approaches the kitchen window of his parents' place. There he sees a reflection of his own childhood but now replacing him, is his son. The fact that his son is being cared for and is in a happy family situation is the trigger of Rabbit's release - "Harry's boy is being fed, this home is happier than his" and he then "glides a pace backward".² From then on "his acts take on decisive haste".³ But even this decision to retreat away from the boundary of family is balanced against the ease of departure. Rabbit is not a fighter - he is rarely the instigator of his own destiny.

As on the basketball court, his movements are the result of a series of events and this is how his life is also played. As he runs to the Springers for the car he realizes he does not have the key - "Everything depends, the whole pure idea" on whether the key is in the car or

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 245.

²Ibid. p. 20.

³Ibid.

not. If it hadn't been, Rabbit's idea of escape may just as easily have fizzled out. He knows instinctively where he wishes to escape to. He wants to go south to an idea of light blue skies, and the idea of movement is registered with Updike's phrase that all the cars were running along together "like sticks on a stream".¹

This idea of the transference of responsibility is constantly reinforced throughout the novels: At the funeral of his baby daughter Rabbit feels on the outside of the mourning party - "All under him Harry feels these humans knit together".² He feels cut off from his daughter too, for it annoys him "that Eccles should stand between him and his daughter".³ From the moment of his daughter's death Rabbit has felt himself to be on the outside of the mourners - now at the funeral his mother and Eccles give him the opportunity to transfer his responsibilities and once again attempt to grasp the chance to seek out that "something" he knows is out there in the light. His mother releases him - releases him from his responsibility; she alone has always seen him caught in the trap of marriage to Janice and because of this has been hard on him and shown open dislike towards Janice. But now she takes over his caring role of Janice

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 21.

²Ibid. p. 236.

³Ibid.

by calling her "My daughter". Rabbit has been liberated. Eccles for his part, in intoning the service, beseeches God that for those who mourn, allow them to cast "every care on thee",¹ and suddenly for Rabbit the sky greets him:

A strange strength sinks down into him.
It is as if he has been crawling in a cave
and now at last beyond the dark recession
of crowding rocks he has seen a patch of light.²

But as the realization of something momentous occurring in his life; that he has been released, he looks to Janice to share in it with him but what happens is that her face blocks the light. Thus Janice is threatening to trap him once again in darkness. She fails him in his wish to share with her, and so he "turns and runs". Again it is an upward movement, a resurgence of youth further highlighted by the ground being a gentle settled bumpiness that "buoys him up with its reminiscence of the dodging spurting runs down a crowded court".³ We are then given another reference to Rabbit's innate need for enclosure - as he leaves the boundary of family, he immediately seeks security within another boundary, and he "arrives between the arms of the woods and aims for the centre of the crescent".⁴ He leaves the boundary turned trap of one

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 238.

²Ibid.

³Ibid. p. 239.

⁴Ibid.

institution in pursuit of the security of another boundary. But then he discovers that once "inside he is less sheltered than he expected. Islanded in light he becomes frightened. He is conspicuous...".¹ Rabbit needs the security that he believes is held within boundaries but when he leaves behind the disintegrating structure of one he finds it hard to make the transition across to a new existence, for he is vulnerable and he is facing the untried - he is a new team member and because of that he is being tested. Until he knows the moves he will continue to feel vulnerable and exposed and this in turn makes him fearful. There is a fear that beyond there is a nothingness - that what he seeks is not there, does not exist and if that is so, then his aspirations dissolve. His fears are highlighted by images of nets and webs and the fear of being trapped will bring him back into the familiar. He is drawn back by the idea of light, of straight roads and of security of the familiar - those same sirens that first enticed his flight have now replaced the original idea of freedom in his flight. Thus he has to balance freedom and fear of the unknown against the security of the known but also a compromise of potential.

Let us now consider the form that Rabbit's escapes take: What Rabbit experiences on his trip south, away

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 239-240.

from Janice and the crumbling concept he had of what a family ought to represent, is a reflection of his mental attitude. Rabbit has a "washed feeling inside", the song on the radio speaks of a "field of corn". Initially he sees things only as an improvement. Even the names consulted on a map at a diner he stops at, reflect this - "Bird in Hand, Paradise, Intercourse, Mt. Airy, Mascot".¹ Opportunities at hand, the exotic, man-woman relationships, height and lightness and a lucky charm - they are all indicative that he is on the "right" route away from what was becoming an unbearable situation. We see also, a return to his youth marked by a reference to his mother when he asks for a piece of apple pie - "the crust is crisp and bubbled and they've had the sense to use cinnamon. His mother's pies always had cinnamon",² And as if to reinforce that what he is doing is the right thing "the hamburgers had been fatter and warmer than the ones you get in Brewer, and the buns had seemed stemmed. Things are improving already".³

But almost immediately after this the atmosphere begins to change quite noticeably - he drives through such towns as Quarryville and Mechanics Grove - references here

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 26.

²Ibid. p. 26.

³Ibid.

to Man's assault on Nature and this is reinforced by the radio itself assaulting Creation and religion by including a commercial for "Lord's Grace Table Napkins and the gorgeous Last Supper Tablecloth" and the fact that "Spring (is) scheduled to arrive tomorrow".¹

Suddenly too, the promise of another world - one of "nooks and pockets in the ground that nobody's poked into yet",² is fast disappearing - he hits Route 1 with its "hot-dog stands and Calso signs and roadside taverns aping log cabins"³ and he finds this unexpectedly discouraging. "The further he drives the more he feels some great confused system, Baltimore now instead of Philadelphia, reaching for him".⁴

The net images that Updike brings into play, in Rabbit, Run in particular, are skilfully contrived and are perhaps seen to work most effectively upon Rabbit's mental state as he continues his drive southwards. What he sees is the barrier of "Baltimore-Washington, which like a two-headed dog guards the coastal route to the south".⁵ In order to break through he chooses to take a multiplicity of smaller routes further inland and already we feel Rabbit becoming entangled in the net of choices to

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 27.

²Ibid, p. 24.

³ & ⁴ Ibid. p. 27.

⁵Ibid.

be made, routes to travel, lines on the maps and always present, the fear created by the unknown landscape where the "land grows wilder, the music on the radio slowly freezes" and there is a web image as the "telephone wires continually whip the stars".¹ Rabbit begins to feel like an alien - even the number plate on the car picks him out as not belonging with the other customers of the roadside cafe. Where a few hours earlier the "hamburgers had been fatter and warmer", here it was "grey ice-cream sodas". "Somehow, though he can't put his finger on the difference, he is unlike the other customers. They sense it too, and look at him with hard eyes".² He lacks the confidence to penetrate this new environment. "He had thought, he had read, that from shore to shore all America was the same. He wonders, is it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?".³

He has become unsure of himself - what his motivation is, where his destination is to be - and because of this, allied with his fear, he becomes angry and looks for a scapegoat for his uncertainties and the most appropriate person for this is the farmer who manned the hardware store/gas station who had furnished the advice

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 28.

²Ibid. p. 29.

³Ibid.

that the "only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you're going before you go there".¹

Does Rabbit hear echoes of coach Tothero here? That Rabbit was successful as a basketball player, apart from his natural ability for the game, was that he knew his moves, he had planned strategy. This is what he is now lacking. Rabbit had known his first move - it was as instinctive a move as his namesake would have made - he felt danger, saw his shadow in the light and made his tactical withdrawal. But now he lacks the guidance of a coach to plan his next moves. Whilst Rabbit had an unformulated plan of escape, he has now been brought back to the realities of the game - you need tactics. For Rabbit, he has never had self-motivation. His moves have always been made for him - by his mother, by his coach, by the U.S. army, by the necessity to marry and to work. This has been perhaps his first real attempt at self-motivation but he is too new at the experience to carry it through.

He blames everything on that farmer with glasses and two shirts. Funny how the man sticks in his throat. He can't think past him, his smugness, his solidity, somehow. He stumbled over him² back there and is stumbling still ...

Whilst Rabbit's goal is formulated - to seek light

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 25.

²Ibid. p. 32.

and freedom, his moves are unplanned and therefore his play is sloppy and full of self-doubt. What occurs is that the "high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net"¹ of his basketball days turns into a net of another sort - a net to capture Rabbit in. The net image increases with Rabbit's mounting tension. The land refuses to change for him - he continues to see the landscape resembling the country around Mt. Judge and the "naked tree twigs make the same net. Indeed the net seems thicker now".² As he continues to drive on, along roads more remote and twisting by the mile the "scrabbling shadows spider backward through the web of wilderness into a black core where he fears his probe of light will stir some beast or ghost".³ The way Rabbit's mind is working is manifested by the route he is following:

the edges crumbling in and the woods on either side crowding down. The road twists more and more wildly in its struggle to gain height and then without warning sheds its skin of asphalt and worms on in dirt.⁴

Rabbit's fear of the wilderness is alleviated somewhat by the encroachment of civilization - that has

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p.32.

²Ibid. p. 30.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

tamed an area into a park - thinned trees, tables and barrels which for Rabbit, represent a salvation for his fears but which again illustrates his ambivalent attitude to Nature. His need to get in touch with an unsullied world but at the same time to be reassured that he is within the safety of a civilizing force that will protect him from those menacing qualities that lurk within the realm of Nature.

The net image is carried through further - with even more force when Rabbit is confronted with a myriad of red and blue lines on the road map he studies: "The names melt away and he sees the map whole, a net, all those red lines and blue lines and stars, a net he is somewhere caught in. He claws at it and tears it ...".¹ The map in Rabbit's mind has become the net that is attempting to catch him.

Let us here consider the idea of the net. We can see the net as a vehicle for capturing something which then presupposes it has been thrown out; in this case Rabbit could consider that his responsibilities back in Mt. Judge are creating this sense of impending capture. When he first set off he was already feeling the drawing in of a net, he felt he was being drawn into Philadelphia and though he changes routes he "doesn't drive five miles

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 31.

before this road begins to feel like a part of the same trap".¹ But then again the net image could be of Rabbit's own making - an unconscious wish to be rescued and here we see the other means by which the image of nets can be employed - as a safety net or rescue vehicle. Rabbit is afraid. Afraid to venture any further. Rabbit sees the idea of nets and entanglement both as a threat and as an excuse for return. He wants to return but he needs some justification in his mind for doing so. It is not that he wishes to return to the trap he has so recently escaped from but he does need to return to the familiar environment.

He is caught in a web of rootlessness, isolation and loneliness. He is unanchored and therefore adrift in a world that is alien to him and within which he feels the intruder - whilst he has travelled along a road of horror, to other vehicles it has been a lovers' lane.²

But even now it is not Rabbit that initiates his return home but rather the fact that he must move; having stopped his car in the middle of the road he is now dogged by car lights and it is as the fear of being overtaken arises that he instinctively turns north and Updike's first phrase describing the return: "The trip home is easier",³

¹ Updike, Rabbit, Run, p.23.

² Ibid. p. 31.

³ Ibid. p. 32.

is, in capsule, Rabbit's sudden release of tension - no more is he trying to pull himself out of one boundary that has become a trap and in so doing trying to surface through the barrier of another existence. The fact that the return feels easy is synonymous for Rabbit of it also being the right thing too.

But what Rabbit's return means, is that he gives up on a chance to "experience". He has had this indefinable feeling that he is missing out on something, though without courage or self-motivation he will not now discover it - "Are rich girls frigid? He'll never know".¹ What he has come back into is a "calm world where nothing matters much".² But his return is still not without some images of nets and capture:

He feels the faded night he left behind in this place as a net of telephone calls and hasty trips, trails of tears and strings of words, white worried threads shuttled through the night and now faded, but still existent, an invisible net overlaying the steep streets and in whose centre he lies secure in his locked hollow hutch.³

Here we still have that net image but Rabbit has retreated back into himself - his vulnerability has been rescued from the evils of the night and from the unknown landscape. Again, he has erected a boundary around himself,

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 33.

²Ibid. p. 32.

³Ibid. p. 35.

manifested by the action of locking himself into the car. Rabbit is better able to protect himself amongst that which he is familiar with than in a world, which because of its unknown qualities is terrifying in its unruliness. He seeks to find solace in turning back rather than confronting the unknown. His actions prove that his need for nurturance and guidance must drive him back to his old coach. However, as he drives into Mt. Judge to return the car to his flat he is still relatively vulnerable and he "becomes cautious and nervous" at the thought of being caught up in the tangle of Janice again. He meets up with Eccles for the first time and because he is associated with the entanglement he had left behind, Rabbit begins to panic - "he feels caught, foresees explanations, embarrassments, prayers, reconciliations rising up like dark walls; (and) his skin prickles in desperation. He feels tenacity in his captor".¹

As we look at the subsequent escape of Rabbit, that occurs a few days after Janice has returned home with the new baby, we discover again, Rabbit's feeling of being trapped. At first he is happy that they are all together as a family. The institution of family appears intact - he has a new job, he is supporting his family, he feels good. He attends church and is uplifted not only by his

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 83.

own well-being but also by the presence of those attending church for they reaffirm his belief that there is a God and there is a plan and he has a place on it. He walks Eccles' wife and child home and, feeling good in his newly reassembled family situation, rejects what he takes to be a proposition from Lucy Eccles. Suddenly "he feels tall and elegant and potential striding along under the trees in his Sunday suit".¹ This was his youth appearing before him again - he was on top of life, he could make choices between girlfriends. Eccles' wife has "jazzed him". Feeling self-righteous about his rejection of Lucy's offer Rabbit feels his goodness should be recognized and rewarded by Janice.

But his elation is slowly dissipated as the day wears on - he feels cut off from contact with Janice: "He has come home from church carrying something precious for Janice and keeps being screened from giving it to her".² The feeling of height, well-being, of youth and brightness begins to fade. The apartment "walls sweat like the walls of a prison" while "outside the sky holds a wide queenly state".³ The fact that memories of youth are brought into play is indicative of Rabbit's state of mind - a feeling of having lost something and with it, having died a little.

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 196.

²Ibid.

³Ibid. p. 198.

It is also reminiscent of his mood prior to his first flight, months before. He is "paniced by the thought that on such a day his parents used to take them on long pleasant walks (and) that they are wasting a beautiful Sunday".¹

Rabbit's intention is to walk out of the apartment when he becomes frustrated with Janice for her lack of response to his lovemaking but he "might have stayed if she hadn't accepted defeat",² and hidden her face in the pillow. "His need to love her is by, so there's no reason to go".³ But she has, in her actions, mentally and quite irrevocably, cut off any communication or companionship that they might have shared and Rabbit, thinking of the air and the trees and streets stretching bare under the street-lamps - goes out the door. He sees the opportunity of release in balancing Janice's lack of communication and the darkness and smallness of the flat against the space and air outside of his home. Once he is away his direction is sure - to go to Ruth's apartment but when that goal is blocked off for him he is faced with barriers all around him - unable to return home because of an indefinable sense that there is "something" else and yet unable to make contact with it.

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 198.

²Ibid. p. 201.

³Ibid.

When Rabbit considers retrospectively his action of leaving the apartment on the Sunday evening, he realizes he is mad at Janice not so much that she was in

the right for once and he was wrong and stupid but the closed feeling of it, the feeling of being closed in. He had gone to church and brought back this little flame and had nowhere to put it on the dark damp walls of the apartment, so it had flickered and gone out. And he realized that he wouldn't always be able to produce this flame.

He has felt the fact that there is a lack of communication between them and that prevents him from sharing. And what holds him back all day from returning home is the "feeling that somewhere there was something better for him" and the "idea that somewhere he'd find an opening".² He has left a prison that is dank and dark and where life cannot be anything but stifled (the candle flame flickering out), and in trying to reach light Rabbit seeks an existence that supports life.

In Rabbit Redux the thematic line of net images is less obvious for the reason that Rabbit is now battling on behalf of America more than for his own freedom. Where in Rabbit, Run he would flee from disintegrating value systems and institutions, he has now learnt that if you do not have a goal to head towards along with a good

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 219.

²Ibid.

game tactic, you face being held in a chaotic state alone and under attack by nihilistic forces. Rabbit has learnt to associate freedom with death or loss and he has had to compromise his freedom for mere existence. The net images which we saw linked to Rabbit's chaotic frame of mind in Rabbit, Run are now only apparent when he ventures into unfamiliar territory - where he is unsure of his acceptance, where he is without the guidance of a "coach". Thus we see him, a few days after Janice has left him, going to Jimbo's Friendly Lounge at the invitation of a fellow black worker. He is understandably nervous at his proposed introduction to an all black bar and as he approaches he notices that there are "no other faces but his on the bridge. From the middle Brewer seems a web, to which glowing droplets adhere".¹ Does he feel caught at this moment? Behind him Janice has left him - her desertion nags at him from within for alone "he must take care of himself.. Peggy's embrace drags at his limbs. Suit feels sticky. Jimbo's Friendly Lounge ... inside it, all the people are black".² The web symbol that he experiences may be seen as a net formed of the complications that he is embroiled in (but unmotivated enough to do little about) or it may be viewed as a premonition of the situation he is about to be exposed to. When he visits the bar he is

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 101.

²Ibid. pp. 101-102.

apprehensive - he is entering new territory - a new ball game played by blacks. He feels in this environment, a need to apologize "for his bulk, his bloated pallor, his dead fame".¹ He is unsure of his moves, what his position will be among them; but he is reassured somewhat by the action around a pool table for the "presence of any game reassures Rabbit. Where any game is being played a hedge exists against fury".²

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 103.

²Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

Religion

his sense of miracle at being himself, himself instead of somebody else, and his old inkling, now fading in the energy crunch, that there was something that wanted him to find it, that¹ he was here on earth on a kind of assignment.

Rabbit's searching seems to be spurred by two things - Christian instruction and intuition. The intuitive search has much stronger impetus than the learned, but both must be examined if one wishes to understand the conflicting drives of Rabbit's psyche. Rabbit's Christian training, though it has little effect on his morals, clearly influences his thinking and, again, paradoxically, is partly the cause of his irrational behaviour. Realizing that he is not living up to expectations of a nominally Christian society, he nevertheless considers himself a Christian.² For Christianity assures him of a special place within Creation. It is acknowledged early on however that his values are of a

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 386.

²Burchard, John Updike. Yea Sayings, p. 44.

more philosophical than religious form, taken as they are as much from the media as from the church and its teaching.

When he first arrives home not long after we have been introduced to him in Rabbit, Run he and Janice watch the Mouseketeer's programme and are given the proverb:

Know thyself ... be what you are ... be yourself. God doesn't want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to each one of us a special talent ... learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them. That's the way to be happy.

This homily, bringing as it were the word of God causes both of them to "become unnaturally still; both are Christians. God's name makes them feel guilty".²

That these novels have existentialist aspects and thus certain implications for our protagonist, is apparent. But it is a decreasing existentialism as the character of Rabbit develops and matures. We initially feel isolated from Rabbit - his rejection of conventional values "tends not only to isolate him somewhat from the reader but isolates him to an even greater degree from the other characters in the novels",³ particularly in Rabbit, Run. He becomes locked in his own skin. Rabbit constantly displays images of human separation or isolation, and in existentialist novels characters "become isolated by the

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p.10.

²Ibid.

³Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 56.

fact that communication itself is inadequate and suspect".¹

He is no one; it is as if he stepped outside of his body and brain a moment to watch the engine run and stepped into nothingness, for this 'he' had been merely a refraction, a vibration within the engine, and now can't get back in. He feels he is behind the windows of the houses they² walk by, watching this three-cornered family ...

The existentialist qualities of these novels is yet another means employed by Updike to reinforce Rabbit's dilemma of needing protective boundaries which often turn to barriers. For we experience with Rabbit this detached view of his existence. If there is one paramount aspect missing from Rabbit's life it would have to be companionship - his needs are for nurturance, genuine affection, respect and security to be embodied in this.. Rabbit needs people in the way a star player needs the team - they are the reason for making points at all. For fulfilment he needs to be accompanied and his fear often arises through this lack of a soul-mate. Note his fear when travelling south that God has deserted him. He is alone while living with Janice. He feels on the outside of the existences of others and to take this even further, he is sometimes on the outside of himself with that feeling of looking at himself through the eyes of others - he is as a stranger observing his own actions. He often imagines himself as seen by others in, as it were,

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 56.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 229.

"framed" situations -

standing there waiting, Rabbit is elated to think that a stranger passing outside the restaurant window, like himself last night outside the West Virginia diner, would see him with a woman. He seems to be that stranger, staring in, envying himself his body and his woman's body.

He wants to enter, be a part of and to share a life with others but everywhere he experiences forms of barriers. Although he tries, he cannot make the transition alone, but then again, in wanting to share the opportunity to experience he becomes disillusioned:

Forgiveness had been big in his heart and now its hate. He hates his wife's face. She doesn't see. She had a chance to join him in truth, just the simplest factual truth, and she turned away.²

Even when Rabbit feels that he has a companion in truth, as with Eccles, he finds instead that they have separate perspectives. And what eventuates is that Rabbit begins to feel manipulated and thus trapped by Eccles' own need to use him, Rabbit, to come to terms with his own belief system.

As we come to know Rabbit and begin to appreciate those nuances of his character that make him act as he does, our sympathy with the protagonist is established - no matter that he is more the anti-hero than the hero, the more so when we see him placed against society's

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 47-48.

²Ibid. p. 239.

rejection of his values. The use of the antagonist Eccles in Rabbit, Run is one of Updike's consistent methods of gaining reader sympathies.¹ Eccles and Rabbit take up the roles of antagonist and protagonist - although he is a minister, Eccles' social worker mentality masks an underlying atheism. Rabbit, the only character who believes in a "something" above the natural level, struggles upward towards it, trying to run clear of enmeshing social complexities.² Though Rabbit is not a "wholly likeable or admirable character and sympathy for him is stretched very thin indeed at times, when he is thrown into conflict with the fundamental sterility of Eccles, Rabbit gains our support by default if nothing else".³

In Rabbit, Run, the physical environment plays an active role. Rabbit has an intimate and intense relationship with the physical world - sometimes in harmony with it, at other times in conflict with it.⁴ Rabbit's sense of God is an unstructured awareness of a divine power present in living things but that does not presuppose however that he "always enjoys a sympathetic and meaningful state with it. The physical environment

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 5.

²Ibid. p. 3.

³Ibid. p. 5.

⁴Ibid. p. 59.

can become a menace that manifests itself in net or web images, as we have already shown. The fear generated can become animate and threatening. When he drives south, the highway "sucks him on" and he feels the "expressway system reaching for him". As he runs from the cemetery into the woods "collapsed trunks hold intricate claws across his path".

However, the real net which attempts to snare Rabbit is the total implications of Humanism, the denial of the Unseen, the insistence upon shared life and therefore shared guilt. Updike presents in Rabbit a man running from the shared guilt of Humanism. He runs but he remains baffled, unable to say clearly what it is he runs from or runs towards.¹ In Rabbit, Run the humanitarian is Eccles, who represents the belief in mutual responsibility - shared problems and shared guilt. But Rabbit finds the human net of involvements unsatisfactory because he is unable to relinquish the sense of importance Man gains by believing in and looking for the "something". While the others feel a closeness at the funeral of his daughter, he begins to draw away from them. His sense of God becomes more vivid and the surrounding people fade from his awareness. The implied dismissal of known value systems places Rabbit solidly in the tradition of Existentialist novels. But

¹Thorburn & Eiland (ed.), A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 18.

when he runs from the funeral, this humanistic ritual of shared responsibility, shared guilt and shared grief - running uphill to escape this net he comes to some form of realization that it is a world of people and he cannot escape the fact.¹

The net of Humanism thrown across Rabbit's life, is so immense that it is inescapable and so like a veil, that the unseen world behind it can be glimpsed only in the briefest moments - or not even glimpsed as such but rather only felt, only intuited. "His feeling that there is an unseen world is instinctive, and more of his actions than anyone suspects constitute transactions with it".² For all the other characters in Rabbit, Run (save the Reverend Kruppenboch) the net of Humanism is, for all they know, the sky itself beneath which they live their unexamined lives, and for them only the tangible is real while for Rabbit the theme of going upward, going "out" to some good place is reinforced.³

Rabbit is comfortable with a religion that tells him there is order in the world and his belief is reaffirmed by contact with those who still believe in the institution

¹Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 42.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 190.

³Markle, Fighters and Lovers, p. 23.

of the church:

He hates all the people on the street in dirty everyday clothes, advertising their belief that the world arches over a pit, that death is final, that the wandering thread of his feelings leads nowhere. Correspondingly he loves the ones dressed for church. The pressed business suits of portly men give substance and respectability to his furtive sensations of the invisible; ... their wives seem to begin to make it visible; and their daughters ... a bloom of faith ... the beauty of belief. He could kiss their¹ feet in gratitude; they release him from fear.

So when Rabbit is alone or without direction, when he is where there is little evidence of a civilizing force - the fear that he experiences is not a fear of God but rather a fear that there is no God; that the world actually does "arch over a pit" and that there is no meaning, no continuous thread, nothing planned in this world and that chaos does reign supreme. That is when we see Rabbit trying to make contact, actually "touching" the physical manifestations of God's Creation - to give him reassurance.

In each of the novels Rabbit has as it were, a bible, by which to set up his standards, to use as a touchstone. In Rabbit, Run this touchstone is God and Eccles whilst Skeeter and his books on American history provide the ballast to Rabbit's fragile existence in Rabbit Redux. A symbol of twenty years further on is apparent in Rabbit is Rich where the Consumer Reports is

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 190.

his guiding light.

For Rabbit, his association with the minister, if it achieves anything, tends to solidify Rabbit's feeling that what he is doing, by being true to himself, is the right thing. As Ruth reflects -

the damndest thing about that minister was that, before, Rabbit at least had the idea he was acting wrong but now he's got the idea he's Jesus Christ out to save the world just by doing whatever comes into his head.

Rabbit is more sure of the existence of God than Eccles appears to be and it makes him uncomfortable to think of Eccles being as human as he is and so lacking in a belief system that does include God; whilst for Rabbit, while he admits to knowing little of theology, does at least "feel". He guesses "that somewhere behind all this ... there's something that wants me to find it".² Rabbit's tentative attention to Eccles initially is in the hope that he has answers. Rabbit's nebulous quest in seeking meaning to life and to his own existence looks to an earthly representative of God: "Well if you're not sure it exists don't ask me. It's right up your alley. If you don't know nobody does".³ When Rabbit realizes that Eccles is looking to him for that elusive meaning - that

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 121.

²Ibid. pp. 103-104.

³Ibid. p. 108.

indefinable "it", he wants to shake off Eccles and the responsibility that has now been placed upon him. As it is, the more effort Rabbit makes towards discovering what part he has in this existence, the harder it becomes to achieve this. Rabbit finds the same thing occurring when he plays golf - with Eccles in this first novel and with his country club friends in Rabbit is Rich. The harder he tries, the worse becomes his game. Golf, it is "like life itself in that its performance cannot be forced and its underlying principle shies from being permanently named".¹

Rabbit has always felt safe within an existence that contains a God but the fact that Eccles is uncertain as to God's existence contributes to a feeling of insecurity and questioning by Rabbit. For he had always felt that there was a certain something that binds things together, makes everything meaningful - an absolute Being that can hold the world in control. But for Rabbit,,he sees yet another institution crumbling - its very boundaries disintegrating from within, from God's personal advocate. Where Rabbit was previously sure of himself: "All I know is what's inside me. That's all I have".² Where he takes comfort and assurance from religious institutions and symbols such as the church across the way from Ruth's

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 49.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 87-88.

apartment - a church that appeared "grey, grave and confident". A church that Rabbit felt gave a blessing to his actions - that approved of his relationship with Ruth - "its rose window ... of red and purple and gold seems ... a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning beneath".¹ Now he is facing uncertainty through his association with Tothero and Eccles. Tothero would have it that "Right and wrong aren't dropped from the sky. We. We make them".² But this revelation of Tothero's chills Rabbit for he "wants to believe in the sky as the source of all things".³ His upward orientation sees God as the ultimate cause and despite attempts otherwise, by both Tothero and Eccles, Rabbit finally comes to terms with the fact that he is right - that God is in his rightful place. For Rabbit, the institution of God and his earthly manifestation in the form of the church is a controlling force in what would otherwise be a chaotic existence - he sees havoc where there is now order. For Rabbit, God represents order, and an encompassing band around Rabbit's world. He has to believe in God, for without such a Being he sees a terrifying nothingness, a void

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p.66.

²Ibid, pp. 226-227.

³Ibid.

that sees the world tumble in its infinite spaces.

When Rabbit is frightened, as he is at times of crisis, or of other's pain, such as when Janice is giving birth; he loses the confidence he had of there being a God - "There is no God; Janice can die":¹ and because he feels the lack of a God force in his life he also sees his life as having been just a "sequence of grotesque poses assumed to no purpose, a magic dance empty of belief".² And with this lack of belief comes the feeling of being "underwater, caught in chains of transparent slime".³ So, for Rabbit, the concept of surfacing and rebirth equates with a renewed belief in a planned Creation and a Creator.

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 160.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

CHAPTER V

Women

... she does have a plumpness, a fullness that calls to him. He thinks Mine, my woman, but then she turns and her smeared frantic face blots out his pride of possession. She becomes a liability that¹ painfully weights the knot below his chest.

Rabbit's need to be protective of people and of institutions is an essential feature of these novels. Rabbit has an inherent need to place the boundary of himself around that which he values and those things or institutions that he believes in, has faith in; and wishes to protect from the disintegrating values that he sees around him and which seem to assail all that he holds worthy of preserving.

This may appear paradoxical in light of what Rabbit's critics have called, his general lack of responsibility; but it is here that we must differentiate between those ambiguities that appear constantly within Rabbit's character; by drawing a line between his fear of being responsible through someone or something's absolute dependence upon him and his need to be protective of those

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 230.

people, those things that are purely independent of him and therefore will grow, or be motivated, completely irrespective of what Rabbit's role is or might be within the situation: "He loves folding the hoed ridge of crumbs of soil over the seeds. Sealed, they cease to be his. The simplicity. Getting rid of something by giving it".¹

Nowhere is this dual role of the irresponsible versus the protective protagonist more apparent than in his relationship to the women who people all three novels. There are certain variables that come into play in Rabbit's relationship with women. He enjoys the delicate nature of some women - "The girls waiting under crimson neon have a floral delicacy";² and he thinks it funny "how plump women have that delicate touch".³ But the delicateness of women that he enjoys does not imply that he likes smallness of stature and the fact that Janice is small, jars constantly with Rabbit and along with her other features combines to create a not "perfect" or "first-rate" product in his eyes: "She is a small woman whose skin tends toward olive and looks tight, as if something swelling inside is straining against her littleness".⁴

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 110.

²Ibid. p. 46.

³Ibid. p. 54.

⁴Ibid. p. 8.

And ten years on in Rabbit Redux, Rabbit still sees Janice in this way: "Something sullen and stunted and tight about her face, a short woman ...".¹ Rabbit likes white skinned women. The fact that Janice's skin (and for that matter, her mother's also) is olive complexioned, rankles him. When he visits her at the hospital after the birth of their daughter he expects the prettiness of her youth to be in evidence, he expects to find her "with ribbons in her hair" - all this as a rightful accompaniment for the state of birth, but instead "its just old Janice" and her "hair is drawn tight against her skull in a sanitary knot and she has no make-up on. Her small skull is dark against the pillow".²

For Rabbit, the smallness of Janice equates with her dependence upon him and this in turn makes Rabbit feel vulnerable - he has the fear of being trapped by Janice's need of him. Here is the concept of responsibility being forced upon him with, he feels, himself having little say in the matter - this is one of Rabbit's dilemmas, he must be free to choose to take on responsibility. When Rabbit became associated with Eccles and began work for Mrs Smith, Eccles is elated with what he sees as the "first constructive thing " he had done since coming to

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 33.

²Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 164.

Mt. Judge, but for Rabbit, this "suggestion that he's been managed rubs him the wrong way".¹ Rabbit must be made to feel gracious in the giving of his self and the world must notice it for what it is.

Rabbit dislikes and is frightened by small fragile women such as Janice. They equate with dependence - they are parasitic in their form. He likes and respects larger women, "he does like women big above the knee",² because of their apparent lack of need and their independent thinking. These women give to Rabbit the gift of his freedom. Strong, independent women are Nature personified - they grow and are self-supporting without the onus of responsibility falling upon Rabbit's shoulders.

Instead of being a living, perfect creature that in its formation is self-supporting with God-given energy; women exhibiting smallness, dark skin and with analogies of skulls all equate with an assault on Nature and a burden on an individual, in this case, Rabbit. Thus, when Rabbit meets Ruth he sees in her all those attributes that he finds missing in Janice.

Like the touch of her hand on his arm, her being his age pleases him, as if, even in high schools on opposite sides of the city, they have learned the same things and gained the same view of life. The Class of '51 view.³

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 169.

²Ibid. p. 176.

³Ibid. p. 47.

And his instinctual response to her is sparked by the knowledge that she knew him while he was a basketball player, albeit indirectly.

He likes a strong looking woman, statuesque: "her broad bottom packs the cloth with a certain composure. Her waist tucks in trimly, squarely, like the lines of her face ... the top of her head comes to his nose".¹ In contrast to Ruth, references to Janice tend to concentrate upon thinness - "her thin, rasping, dumb-girl's voice",² and the "thin snore out of her black mouth ...".³ His relationship with women feels more comfortable to him when he can meet them on an equal footing - two individuals not relying one upon the other for support or for their existence. He likes abundance in women and this abundance may come from a variety of sources such as size: "She (Ruth) is fat ... but not that fat. Chunky, more. But tall ... Her thighs fill the front of her dress ...".⁴

When he takes Ruth, on Memorial Day, to the public swimming pool, everything about her pleases him, from her stately shoulders to the solid sight of her "standing in the water ... cut off at the thighs like a statue", all of

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p.47.

²Ibid. p. 200.

³Ibid. p. 228.

⁴Ibid. p. 46.

which made his heart swell "with pride, made him harden all over with a chill clench of ownership. His, she was his ...".¹ The fact that she was possessed of independence within her build attracts Rabbit to her - she is free-standing, complete without him and this in itself causes Rabbit's need to be protective of her - to have himself belong to her.

This need of Rabbit's to be there for women, to be their protector when they are at their most delicate but still independent moments, is brought home to the reader immediately after the birth of his daughter when he visits Janice:

The bed is almost as high as his shoulders when he sits down, and he enjoys being in this strange relation to a woman - as if he is carrying her on his shoulder but without the weight.²

Other forms of abundance in women that appeals to Rabbit is hair (a recurring theme in these novels). When he meets Ruth for the first time he imagines she was once quite pretty for "her hair is thick, and that's the sign".³ In contrast, when he looks at Janice as we are first introduced to her, it seems to him that just yesterday "she stopped looking pretty ... her hair has thinned, so he keeps thinking of her skull under it".⁴ That Rabbit

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 115.

²Ibid. p. 176.

³Ibid. p. 47.

⁴Ibid. p. 8.

keeps mentioning skulls gives us this skeletal feeling that his life is not fleshed out - it lacks abundance, meaning, depth and in running he is looking not so much for the meaning of life but for some meaning in his life - a fuller existence that will round his life out somewhat; it does not necessarily have to be a philosophical broadening - we can see some of its fulfilment in Rabbit's enjoyment of being a member of the country club in Rabbit is Rich.

This abundance can also flow from the energy generated from the women characters. In Rabbit is Rich, he is fascinated by a group of women who have set up house not far from Mrs Springers. "What he cannot figure out about these butch ladies is not why they don't like him but why he wants them to, why just the distant sound of their hammering has the power to hurt him, to make him feel excluded".¹ Here is one of the paradoxes of Rabbit's character. He needs women to play their rightful role - while they are so encased there is harmony in his life but at the same time he is fascinated by and attracted to the independence and self motivation of women. He wants to be included in their world.

Rabbit's need for strong independent women as the foil to his own existence can be seen reflected in

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 229.

references to his mother: "And he admires this, her willingness to have him hate her, so long as he gets her message".¹ He loses respect for those whose relationship to him is not based on an independent stance: "Whatever Mrs Springer says he can slip away from because in the end she has to stick with him and anyway he feels somehow she wants to like him but with his mother there's no question of liking him they're not even in a way separate people ... if he feels that withdrawal it will be the grave itself ... sitting there by himself he comes to the conclusion that either he or his mother must die".²

Only Rabbit's mother appears to recognise that Rabbit is trapped in situations that do not give him complete fulfilment; that he is confined by his boundaries of commitment to family, work etc. She feels he has been trapped by Janice. It worries her not at all what he does so long as he is free. She understands about Ruth, she is proud of Mim for taking life and using it to her own advantage. When Rabbit returns to Janice and Nelson, his mother receives them both rather coolly. She feels he has sold himself out. And Rabbit feels prompted to want to say: "What is this, anyway? You act like I've gone over to the other side. You're acting insane. Don't you know

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 185.

²Ibid. p. 233.

it's the right side and why don't you praise me?"¹ And again as she meets up with Rabbit at the funeral of his daughter, after he had once more returned to the confines of his family, she reaches for him with curved arms saying "Hassy - what have they done to you?"² And when he asks his mother what choice he has but to take Janice back after she had left him to live with Starvos she advises him to "Run. Leave Brewer. I never knew why you came back".³ She wants him to be like Mim. She wants him not to "say no to life, Hassy". She'd rather have "a postcard from him happy than seeing him sitting there like a lump".⁴ In Rabbit Redux, Rabbit comes to some realization: "He knows that in all his rolling on the world his mother is the only person who knows him...".⁵ But whilst his mother would cut him free she fails to realize the fact that Rabbit is unable to free himself without guidance, signposts or companionship and it is only as we near the completion of the trilogy that we see Rabbit having obtained some semblance of these criteria.

When he takes Ruth out one evening he is becoming slightly discontent with his relationship with her - has

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 185.

²Ibid. p 235.

³Rabbit Redux, p. 172.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. p. 146.

he a premonition of the threats of responsibility pulling him in? He has noticed that she seems "a little sick some times",¹ and he notices the waitress and the fact that she "doesn't care about him; he likes that, that she doesn't care. The thing about Ruth is that lately she's been trying to make him feel guilty about something".² We have here, Rabbit's sensing the role of protector, that he has chosen to take over Ruth, and to be fair to Ruth - much against her wishes; is now turning into a trap of responsibility - a responsibility as a consequence of his own actions - that she may be pregnant and the fact that he has deprived her of her former means of income: "The past was a vine hanging on by just these five tendrils and it tore away easily, leaving her, clean, and the blue and blank".³ This was how Rabbit saw and wanted her but the burrow situation that Rabbit has created for himself and Ruth, under God's protection with the church across the way from her apartment, is now assailing Rabbit's independence - his need to choose the position he wishes to take in this world. It is attacking the boundaries of Self and in so doing makes him vulnerable to attack from all quarters - places him in a trap of responsibility. Ruth has let him down by

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 140.

²Ibid. p. 141.

³Ibid. p. 140.

discarding her independence and consequently lost some of Rabbit's respect for her. Rabbit ignores however, the fact that it is through his persuasion that she has done so - all he is capable of visualizing is the need to protect himself from being responsible for the dependence of others upon himself. The core of himself is all that he has to call his own and he is going to fight to retain it.

The fact that Rabbit does not escape outright from Ruth is symbolic of all his moves - though he senses traps he is motivated only by the game play - situations have to occur that give him, as it were, direction. We saw this in his first escape - once the map stopped giving him clear directions he was trapped in a web of his own indecisions. In this instance, the escape solution is offered by the birth of Janice's baby.

Rabbit is willing to carry and protect a woman but not be burdened by the weight of responsibility that a dependent woman would impose upon his sensibilities. As with all responsibilities for Rabbit, the role of protector can become so easily one of entrapment. In Rabbit Redux to him "his son and father seem alike fragile and sad to him. That's the trouble with caring about anybody, you begin to feel overprotective. Then you begin to feel crowded".¹ This reiterates the feeling he had when his

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 22.

mother asks him what is to happen to Ruth now that he has returned to Janice and his family and while telling her that Ruth can take care of herself, that she didn't expect anything - it at the same time "makes his life seem cramped, that Ruth can be mentioned out of his mother's mouth".¹ Crowded, cramped - both are versions of nets, mantles of Humanism that make for Rabbit, an uneasy sensation.

Another variable in Rabbit's relationship to woman is his belief in the position of women within the institution of this civilized society. Whilst he has respect for strong women and experiences a comfortable association with them - meeting them on an equal plane, he also has the notion that women, like men, like families, like one's country - all have certain roles to maintain: "he doesn't like the way the kid is sitting on the inside of the booth with Mim on the outside in the man's place".² When he first meets Ruth he wants to know when her birthday was and when he discovers it to be four months after his own he says "I win!, You win! As if she knows how this makes him feel warmer; you can't feel master, quite, of a woman who's older".³ He is comfortable when

¹Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 184.

²Ibid. p. 147.

³Ibid. p. 49.

people perform to the role Rabbit was led to expect in his youth - "Rabbit is content. That is what he likes, domestic peace. Women circling with dutiful footsteps above him ...".¹ For Rabbit, rightful role play represents safety, security and keeps the boundaries of institutions intact.

Rabbit likes to be in control of a situation and strong women give him this impetus to perform - he gets the feeling again of being a star. "He has this ridiculous feeling with Mrs Eccles, that he's in charge and can't make mistakes".²

There is a slight shift of emphasis to be found in Rabbit Redux concerning Rabbit's feelings on dependence. In Rabbit, Run he feels the pressure of responsibility - of the fact that people close to you are likely to become dependent upon you and this is what in part makes him flee. For although loving people gives Rabbit life - it also threatens him with humanistic annihilation, since people associate love with responsibility and therefore feel the right to make demands upon him. In Rabbit Redux however, he now uses this dependence syndrome as part of his reason for existing, for remaining and thus he is justified in not actioning himself out of his present lifestyle. He uses

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 78.

²Ibid, p. 168.

the dependence of others as a crutch. He still takes on the role of protector of the independent. When he and Janice confront each other with the knowledge of her infidelity she initially meets him on an equal level, for she too has shown independence. This then allows Rabbit to want to be protective of her, he wants to "re-enclose her". As they physically assault each other - Rabbit sees purpose in his action symbolised by the mention of light. When Janice hits back at him he "feels a flash of pleasure: sunlight in a tunnel. He hits her three, four, five times unable to stop, boring his way to that sunlight", but then as she displays abasement he later mourns the "receding of that light, that ecstasy of his hitting her, of knocking her open. Now she will become another cripple he must take care of".¹

Rabbit has to be in control of his own actions and this relates to his wish not to be manipulated. When he returns home with Jill after literally being "given" her by her acquaintances at Jimbo's, he is immediately put on the defensive in having to justify his home environment and he has to repulse Jill's advances in order to give himself adequate mastery over the situation. This then makes him less vulnerable and therefore less open to assault.

How does Rabbit feel about Janice when we meet up

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, pp. 60-61.

with him again in Rabbit is Rich? He has come to appreciate her somewhat and what she represents. He cannot help but do so -

He cannot dislike this brown-eyed woman who has been his indifferent wife for 23 years just this May. He is rich because of her inheritance and this mutual knowledge rests adhesively between them like a form of sex, comfortable and sly.¹

But there is now, apart from the appreciation of his good fortune, a grudging respect for his wife when she displays independence, self assurance; when she shows that she has survived life and come out on top - better equipped than Rabbit in many ways from the experience. We see this same form of respect, or perhaps it is more a grudging admiration, from Rabbit towards his mother-in-law who now that she no longer poses a threat to him, constantly amazes him in her tenacity, perserverance and her values that are similar to the ones Rabbit once held. He now has a rapport and camaraderie with her that could not have been envisaged in Rabbit, Run. They are survivors while all around, those they have known disappear.

There are moments though for Rabbit when he encounters actions on Janice's part that label her "dumb" in his eyes and he has this urge to rub her out. "Some day what would give him great pleasure would be to take a large round rock and crush her skull in with it".²

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 40.

²Ibid. p. 60.

For it is at times like these he is made to feel responsible for her, albeit just her actions and by being responsible the old fears surface again. He blames Janice for his life - for his lack of motivation and self fulfilment - "The entire squeezed and cut-down shape of his life is her fault: at every turn she has become a wall to his freedom".¹ And as always when upset by Janice and her actions or lack of them, he sees her small, dried up face - for it represents for him a dried up existence, a lack of fullness and ripeness that represents the potential for human existence.

After twenty three years of marriage Rabbit is sometimes lulled into thinking he and Janice are one. They have gone through so much together the "guilt they share rests in their laps like these safety belts, holding them fast, chafing only when they try to move".² However, the reality is that Rabbit finds himself still alone in what is important to him: "He had mistaken the two of them for one and entrusted to her this ghost of his alone".³ When he feels rebuffed in his approach to her he reacts by retreating into his self and acting politely distant in

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 42.

²Ibid. p. 361,

³Ibid. p. 70.

his dislike of her. So while they may still not be one, by the closing chapters of Rabbit is Rich they have an uneasy compromise. When he meets Janice on equal terms he is at his most comfortable with her - he is free of the pressure of responsibility - "He likes it, that up here in the Poconos she looks so often like a boy. His playmate".¹

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 134.

CONCLUSION

In his inner life too Rabbit dodges among more blanks than there used to be, patches of burnt-out gray cells where there used to¹ be lust and keen dreaming and wide-eyed dread.

Rabbit's need for boundaries still exists. Our protagonist needs to feel protected, enclosed and this involves boundaries in some form around the various aspects of his life. He has this need to protect that which he holds important but this urge to protect institutions or persons must be without the accompaniment of responsibility. The struggles that he experiences, as often as not, stem from the fact that he finds the institutions that he values - disintegrating and thus are converted into traps. But in attempting to escape from these traps he is unable to draw on an inner confidence that would enable him to explore new boundaries and to "experience". He runs to avoid traps, but the running itself becomes a trap. Fear of the unknown also pushes him into areas where he finds himself confused and desperately lonely.

The thematic line of Rabbit's need for boundaries, it is my contention, is what umbrellas his relationship to

¹Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 16.

women, to his child, to his work, to society, to religion and to himself in particular - a need to protect himself against losing control over his own actions. For nearly every facet of his life and for most of the feelings he experiences, are linked to the need for security and the stability gained from the presence of such boundaries. But the paradox that occurs is that these boundaries in essence may and very often do turn into barriers and instead of enclosing and protecting, they become unassailable walls against Rabbit's participation in those institutions he seeks to be a part of.

In Rabbit, Run we had a work that evoked some sense of hope for our protagonist - a hope generated through his rejection of societal values that demands his energy and individuality; and his defending the claims of the libidinous presocial self; but this hope slowly dissipated and provides us with, in Rabbit Redux, an individual accepting himself as he is - not a very appealing person, but nevertheless a consistent worker, a concerned parent and a concerned but unmotivated citizen of a degenerated country. When his son asks him why he disagrees with everybody he replies that he loves his country and can't stand to have it knocked; but when told that if he loved it he should want it better he feels bound to reply that if "it was better, I'd have to be better".¹ By the time we see

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 149.

him in Rabbit is Rich this same man has become complacent and at one with his America and her standards and ideals, or lack thereof. He is working with the system.

As Rabbit becomes older, he also becomes more lifeless and this in turn leads him less to fear the loss of opportunity and of his potential, and subsequently he is less likely to run: "Fear. That's what makes us poor bastards run. You don't know what fear is, do you, poor baby? That's why you're so dead".¹ It was fear that made him run in the first novel, fear at being trapped, of being forever lifeless; but the cost of his freedom was a life and now he is afraid to run anymore. Fear now holds him where once before it was the fear that motivated him. In running he sought freedom and now for him "freedom means murder. Rebirth means death".²

By Rabbit Redux he has partly resigned himself to the concept of compromise, of balance - for birth or renewal there has to be death. Thus he has balanced the cost of freedom against the price of loss or death and we see the net of Humanism finally coming to rest upon him. He has come to accept responsibility for his actions. It has come to him: that "growth is betrayal. There is no other route. There is no arriving somewhere without leaving somewhere".³

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 140.

²Ibid. p. 172.

³Ibid. p. 72.

He is beginning to accept his position in life. He is now an "old lump whose only use is to stay in place to keep the lumps on top of him from tumbling".¹ Ten years before he had a sense of a belief that, unformulated though it was, was still strong enough to motivate him out of life-draining situations. But in Rabbit Redux he has become one of the burnt out cynics - the washed-out dissipated Americans in need of revitalizing. We can gainsay a little of what Rabbit's frame of mind is, as we witness the moon shot take-off for he feels that "Columbus flew blind and hit something, these guys see exactly where they're aiming, and it's a big round nothing".²

The former themes of hope, quest and vitality in Rabbit, Run disappear by the next Rabbit novel. When Janice leaves him, he remains oblivious and passive. The old man in charge of guarding Rabbit's gutted house has explained the logic of non-involvement to Rabbit. He will turn the other way and pretend not to see Rabbit illegally enter the house. "Any damage you do yourself, you're the party responsible".³ The message? Don't get involved so that you won't be responsible for any damage. Throughout most of the book Rabbit has been following this philosophy. He refuses to

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 172.

²Ibid. pp. 24-25.

³Ibid. p. 288.

encourage or force Janice to return. He no longer wants to take chances that are likely to put the blame at his door. He has come to a personal recognition that the "world is quicksand. Find the straight path and stick to it".¹ If you take chances, move away from this straight path, death occurs - it had happened to his daughter.

As we see Rabbit in Rabbit is Rich he may no longer be a 'star' player but he has survived life's game to end up on the winning team and this need to belong has been fulfilled.

What has he done ... with this life of his more than half over? He was a good boy to his mother and then a good boy to the crowds at the basketball games, a good boy to Tothero his old coach, who saw in Rabbit something special. And Ruth saw in him something special too, though she saw it winking out. For a while Harry had kicked against death, then he gave in and went to work. Now the dead are so many he feels for the living around him. The camaraderie of survivors. He loves the people with him, penned in among the lines of the tennis court.²

¹Updike, Rabbit Redux, p. 33.

²Updike, Rabbit is Rich, p. 130.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burchard, R.C. John Updike. Yea Sayings. Southern Illinois University Press, Edwardsville, 2nd. ed., 1974.

Burr, R.W. Puer Aeternus. An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run. Juris Verlag, Zurich, 1974.

Greiner, D.J. The Other John Updike. Ohio University Press, Athens, 1981.

John Updike. A Collection of Critical Essays. edited by D. Thorburn & H. Eiland. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1st. ed., 1979.

Markle, J.B. Fighters and Lovers. New York University Press, New York, 1st. ed., 1973.

Tanner, T. City of Words. American Fiction 1950-1970. Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1971.

Updike, J. Rabbit is Rich. Penguin Books, New York, 1981.

Updike, J. Rabbit Redux. Penguin Books, New York, 1971.

Updike, J. Rabbit, Run. Penguin Books, New York, 2nd. ed., 1964.
